NOVEMBER 1995

LOUIS L'AMOUR WESTERN MAGAZINE

WPS 04376

A Conversation with
Bill Pronzini
Author
of the
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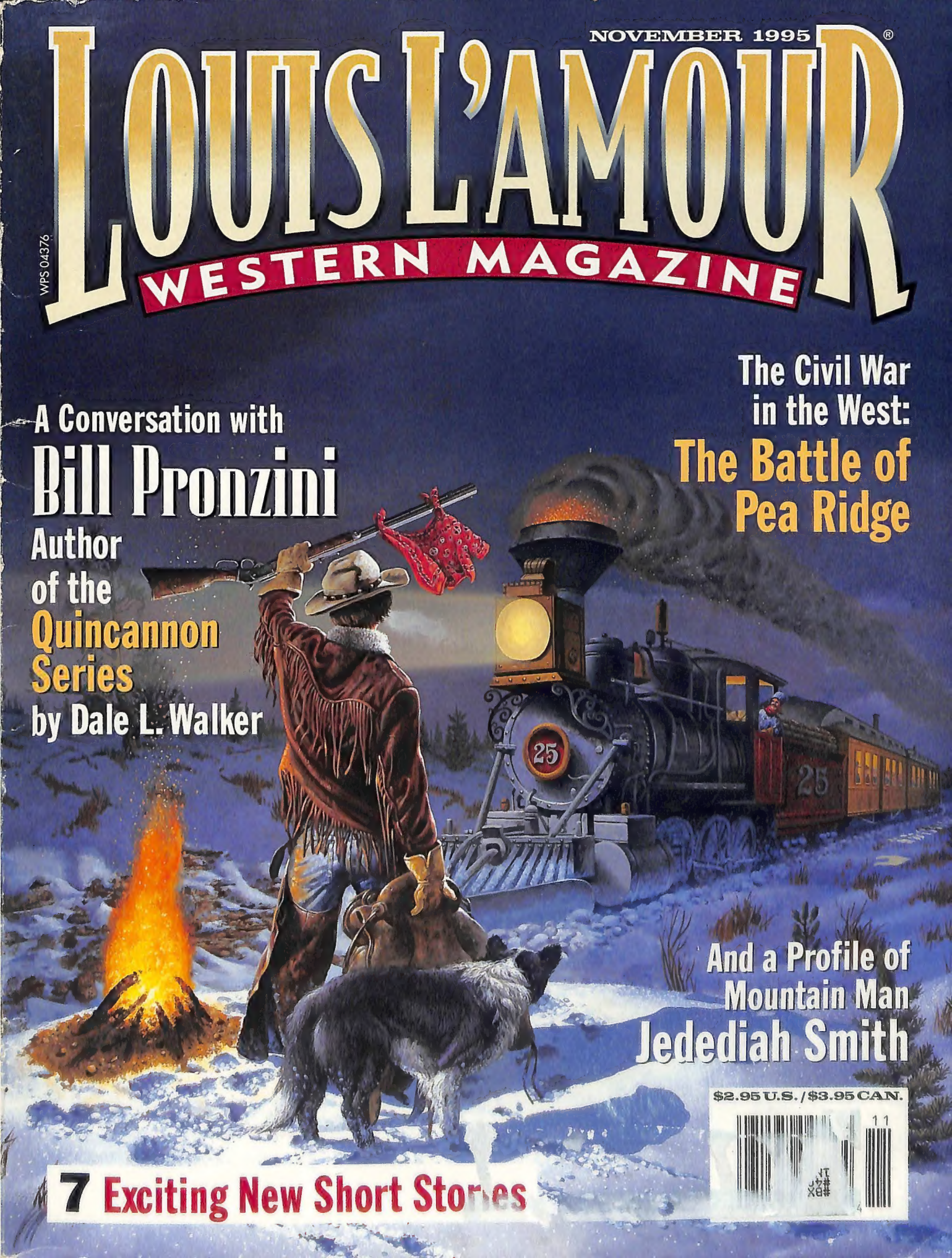
Series
by Dale L. Walker

The Civil War
in the West:
The Battle of Pea Ridge



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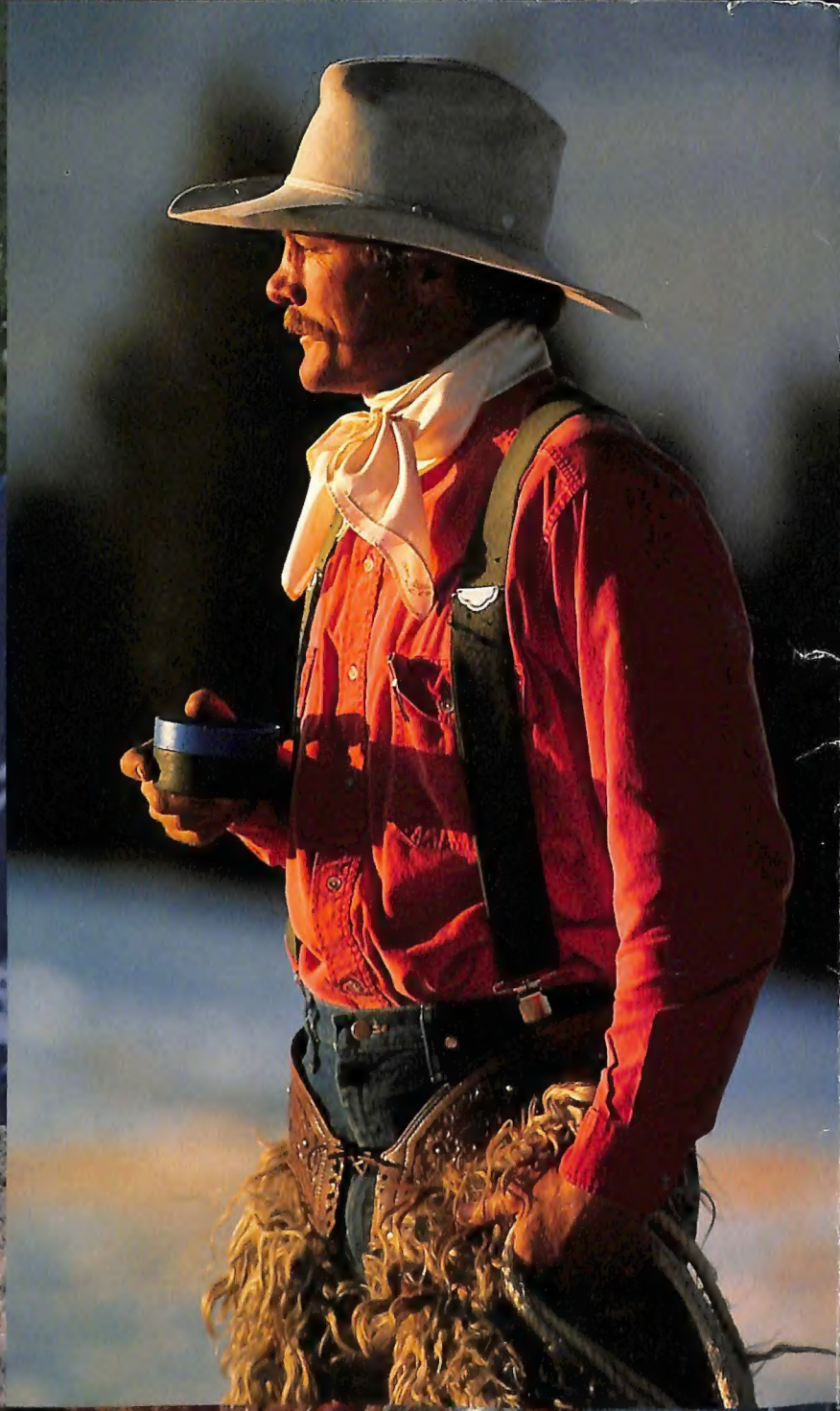

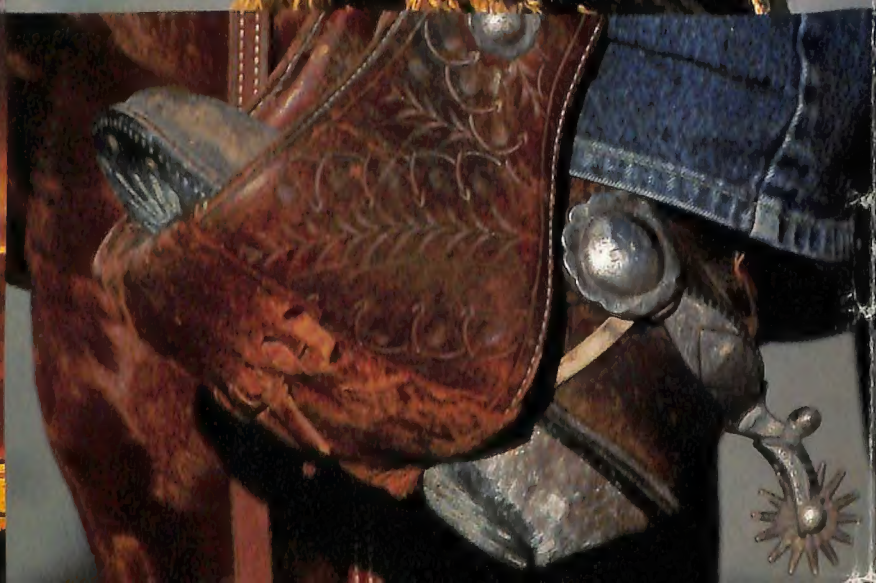

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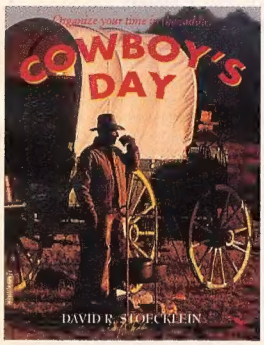

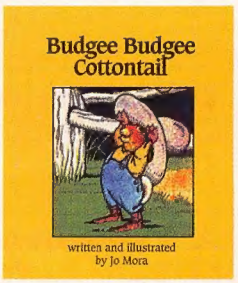

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LOUIS L'AMOUR WESTERN MAGAZINE

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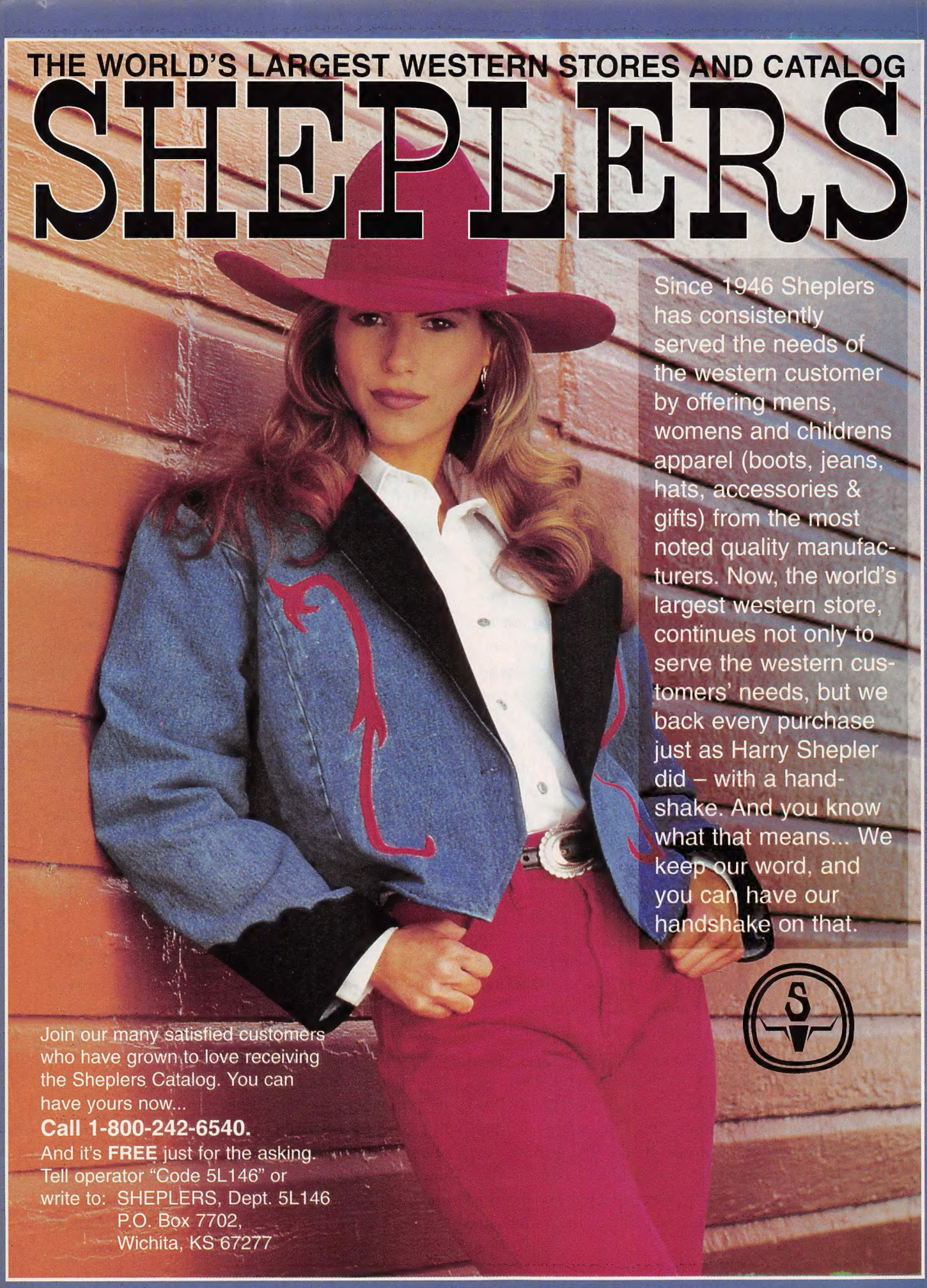

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BY ELANA LORE

We have had several questions from readers that we'd like to address in this issue.

Some of you are having trouble finding the magazine on the newsstand. This is a common problem when you're a bimonthly magazine and fairly new in the marketplace—we may sell out before you think to look for a new issue, or not be carried by your newsstand yet. There are two simple ways to deal with this—ask your newsstand dealer to order a copy for you, or use our toll-free number (1-800-888-0408) to subscribe.

Some of you have just found us and want back issues of the magazine. We have only a limited quantity. They are available by writing to *Louis L'Amour Western Magazine,* P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Or call 1-800-338-7531. The price per issue is $4.45, in U.S. funds, for all customers—U.S., Canadian, and foreign.

We have not said much about how we select our Classic Western for each issue, and would like to now. Some of the stories are chosen because they were made into films and television shows for which they are better known. An example is "The Tin Star," by John Cunningham, in our May 1995 issue, which was made into the movie *High Noon.* The second category is stories that have endured the test of time but aren't frequently reprinted in anthologies—for instance, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce. We also like to reprint stories that have won awards. "Call of the Cow Country," by Harry Webb, which appears in this issue, is a past winner of Western Writers of America's Spur Award for Best Short Story.

When we buy our first story from an author, we send along a questionnaire with the contract so we can get to know our writers better—and pass along to you what we've learned.

In this issue, we have a Civil War story by a writer named O'Dell Garrett, who is new to our pages. He is an information officer for the State Military Department of Arkansas and editor of the *Arkansas Guard* magazine. While this story is his first fiction, he has published many articles in military newspapers and magazines, and several poems. He tells us that he started his journalism career as a cartoonist.

Like many of our contributors, he has a wide variety of interests besides writing. He is a semi-professional magician, and has recently enrolled in a martial arts program, where he says he is progressing well.

Apparently, his interest in the Civil War goes way back. He tells us that after reading Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe in the fifth grade, he wrote a one-act Civil War play for his fifth grade class.

C. F. Eckhardt is not new to our pages. If you are familiar with the stories of his we have published in previous issues, you may have noticed his deep affection for old trains, which play a big role in "131 Blue Jay Road," in this issue. He is another of our many Texas authors—he grew up on a hardpan and cedar brake ranch in central Texas, and spent sixteen years as a small-town Texas lawman.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the magazine.

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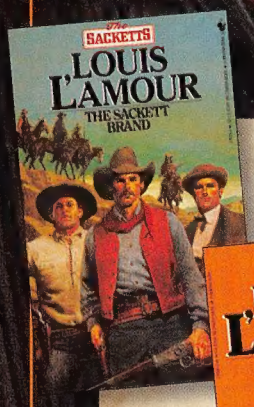
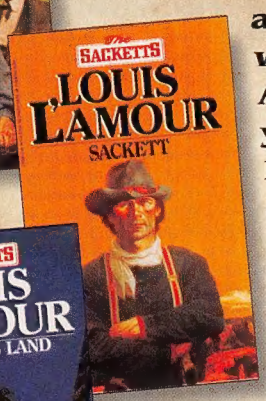
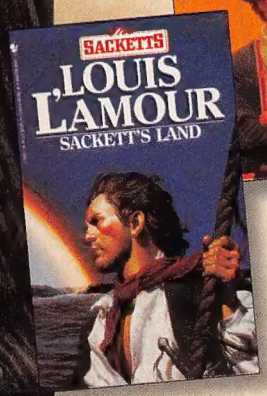
THE SACKETTS

by LOUIS L'AMOUR







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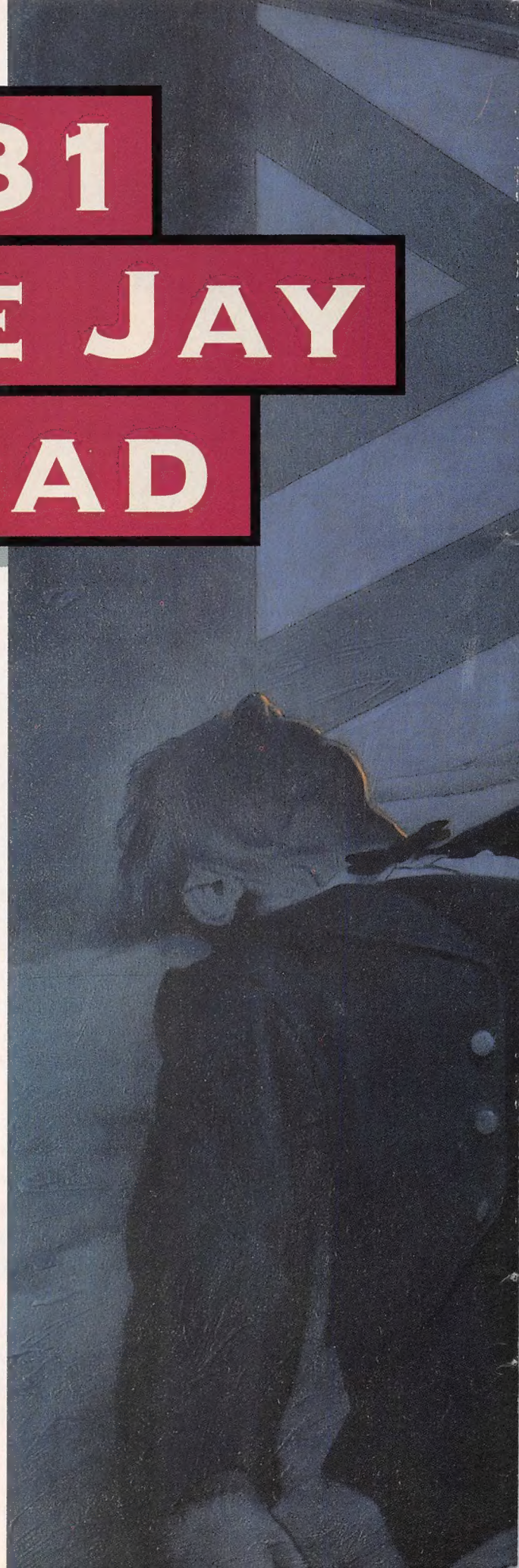
by C. F. ECKHARDT

131 BLUE JAY ROAD



I had a paper route—the *Dallas News* and the *Fort Worth Star*—in 1944. Mom worked as the night dispatcher for the police and sheriff. Dad was overseas, likely dead. He was with the 131st Artillery—the Texas Guard outfit that went to the Philippines—and nobody'd heard anything since Corregidor had fallen and General Wainwright had had to surrender.

I also had a wake-up route for the Tiktok. The Tiktok—the Texas-Oklahoma-Kansas Railroad—ran from McCafferty, Texas, where it joined the T&P, to someplace about the same size on the U-P up in Kansas. We called it the Tiktok because of T-O-K on the tenders and because Mr. Daniel P. R. Havey, president and general manager of the road, was a downright *nut* about a train being on time. He smoked King Edward the Seventh Banker cigars, and they said when a train was more than

ILLUSTRATION BY JASON DOWD

I WAS THE ONLY KID IN MCCAFFERTY GRAMMAR SCHOOL'S EIGHTH GRADE WHO HAD A REAL, HONEST-TO-GOD POCKETWATCH THAT WORKED.

five minutes off schedule he commenced to puffing his cigar something fierce. They said he once smoked eight King Edward the Seventh Bankers in an hour when a train was fifty-seven minutes late. I don't know about that because I didn't see it, but I know that if there wasn't an *awful* good reason for a train being over a half hour off schedule, a whole train crew could find the draft board breathing down their necks.

The T&P mail train out of Dallas and Forth Worth came through at ten past two in the morning, every morning of the world, picked up our outgoing mail, dropped off a sack of incoming mail, dropped off my papers, watered up, and headed west. About a quarter past two, depending on who I had to wake up, I'd be at the depot, pick up my papers, fold them, and put them in my paper bags—Dallas on the left, Forth Worth on the right. I had 107 papers to throw. Fifty-five were *Dallas News*es and fifty-two were *Fort Worth Star*s. I'd put my paper bags across the saddle horn on ol' Dolly, our mare—I had a bike in the garage, but you couldn't get tires—and be out throwing papers by a quarter to three.

Since I was at the depot every morning by a quarter past two anyway, Mr. Havey told me he would give me three dollars extra every week, guaranteed, and a thirteen-jewel American Standard Sportsman pocketwatch in a stainless-steel hunting case—the kind with the lid over the face that flips up when you push on the stem—to boot, to do the wake-up calls. Every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday morning I picked up a list of names and addresses and set my watch by the big Regulator in the depot. It was stem-set, not lever-set like the B. W. Raymond railroad watches the regular railroad men had, but it kept good time. I was never over a half minute off the Regulator when I set it. I was the only kid in McCafferty Grammar School's eighth grade who had a real, honest-to-God pocketwatch that really worked in the watch pocket of his jeans. Nobody dared steal it, neither, on account of it had "Property of Texas Oklahoma Kansas Railroad" stamped on the back of the case. I've still got 'er, and she still works.

Then, on my paper route, I stopped at each address and knocked on the door, or rang the doorbell if there was one, and when it was answered I wrote down the time. I had to write down who came to the door and the time, and say, "Texas Oklahoma Kansas Railroad crew wake-up call."

The first house I hit—seven days a week—was old Mr. Omar Sanders's place. He was the depot agent, and I always got him up right at three. Then, on Mondays and Fridays, I woke up Mr. Slater and Mr. Kaufmann, the engineer and the fireman on Number 1, and Mr. Holder, the conductor. On Wednesdays and Saturdays it was Mr. Gregg and old Johnny Baughman, the engineer and the fireman on Number 2, and Mr. Clark, the conductor. Every day I got Mr. Vasery and Mr. Brand, the crew on the yard goat, Little Nell.

As soon as I was done with my paper route, which was about half past five, I'd go down to the depot and hand my paper to Mr. Sanders, and he'd put it in a pigeonhole for Mr. Havey to pick up. The northbound mixed left at a quarter to six—Number 1 on Monday and Friday, Number 2 on Wednesday and Saturday. If there was more than a quarter of an hour between what my wake-up sheet said and what time the man clocked in at the depot, there was hell to pay. Three times clocking in late and Mr. Havey put an ad in the Fort Worth and Dallas papers. That's why Mary Lou Schofield won't speak to me to this day—more than fifty years later. Her daddy was the conductor on Number 1 before Mr. Holder, back when I first started. In three months—March, April, and May of 1942—he was late twice and actually missed his train the third time. Mr. Havey fired him, the army drafted him, he got sent to Fort Benning to train, and he died of pneumonia there. She's blamed me for it ever since.

Me and Mr. Havey, we got along fine, and I wanted to go to work for the Tiktok full-time, but I was just fourteen and couldn't yet. Mr. Havey, though, he let me come down to the yard after school and learn, and I worked breaking down the cars the T&P set out, and I even got to ride in Little Nell and make up consists for Number 1 and Number 2 to take to Kansas, or break down and work in cars from the U-P for the T&P to pick up. I didn't get paid, but I did get a pass good for two on the Tiktok that was good on the T&P, too,

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ON THE FIRST SUNDAY IN FEBRUARY 1944, A HOWLING BLIZZARD CAME ACROSS THE RIVER. THE T&P 2:10 DIDN'T GET IN UNTIL A QUARTER PAST FIVE.

so Mom and me got to go see Grammaw and Pappaw and Dad's sister, Aunt Velma, in Mineral Wells twice during the war, and it didn't cost us anything but our eats on the train.

The only feller I never had any trouble waking up was Mr. Holder, the conductor on Number 1. He was a tall, skinny man with a hillbilly twang in his voice, and he looked to be past fifty, anyway. He was always up and he usually answered the door already in his suit—not the coat yet, but his britches, white shirt, tie, and vest with the big gold watch chain across his vest. He'd always say, "Boy, did you check your watch?"

"Yes, sir," I'd say, and show him. Then he'd check his B. W. Raymond against mine to be sure his time was right, and it always was.

Sometimes Mr. Holder would done be gone, and Miz Holder would answer the door. She was a real pretty woman, a lot younger than he was. She had kind of dark blond hair and blue eyes, and in the summertime she'd be wearing a light kimono that she sometimes didn't tie too tight, and she had some real nice bosoms.

The Holders lived at 131 Blue Jay Road, which was only three blocks from the depot, so I always went there last. It was usually a little before half past three when I got there, and if Mr. Holder was already gone, Miz Holder would ask me in for a cup of coffee, especially if it was cool out. They lived in a little box house—a living room with a fireplace, a dining room cut off with french doors, a kitchen back of the dining room, a hall that led from the kitchen to the only bedroom behind the living room, and a bathroom between the kitchen and the bedroom. There was a screened porch across the back. It had a high-pitched roof—about eight in twelve—and a pair of dormer windows in the attic. Our house was just like it, except Dad took out the french doors and closed in half the back porch so I'd have a room of my own, and we had a five-twelve roof and no dormers.

Miz Holder would take me back to the kitchen—always through the living room to the hall and then to the kitchen, and I never saw the french doors open—and it was always warm there. They had a coal cookstove and a wood heater in the bedroom, I guessed, because I saw three flues, and when it was really cold, they all had smoke coming out. We'd sit down at a little white linoleum-topped table and we'd have a cup of coffee and sometimes cookies, and sometimes—accidental, of course—I'd get a glimpse of her bosoms or even the inside of her thigh as we sat there. I'd drink up my coffee, say, "Thank'ee, ma'am," and go back outside, get on Dolly, and finish throwing my papers.

On the first Sunday in February 1944, a howling blizzard came across the Red River. The wind was so hard and the snow was so thick that the T&P 2:10 didn't get in until a quarter past five. I woke up Mr. Sanders and was down at the depot by a quarter past two—Dolly knew the way, even in the snow—and I put her in the handcar shed out of the storm. I let myself in with my key. There weren't any Tiktok trains on Sunday, but there were five T&P passenger locals that the Tiktok depot took care of. I built a fire in the big heater, filled the box with coal, and put some coffee on. When the 2:10 finally did get in I was sound asleep in Mr. Sanders's swivel chair.

I threw my papers late, but it didn't matter. The whole town was shut down. By that evening there was nigh on a foot of snow and it just kept falling all day and into the night.

I got up at half past one Monday morning, drank some coffee, ate a piece of cold cornbread, went out and saddled Dolly, and rode through the snow down to the depot. I went in and built a fire and put the coffee on, and of course the T&P 2:10 was late again. At half past two I got my time paper and headed out.

I woke Mr. Sanders up at 2:40, Mr. Slate at 2:47, Mr. Kaufmann at 2:58, Mr. Veasey at 3:09, Mr. Brand at 3:17, and I got to Mr. Holder's at 3:26, which was pretty late, but it was cold and slow going in the snow.

Miz Holder answered the door. "Bobby, you come on in here," she said. "You must be freezin'. Mr. Holder"—she always called him Mr. Holder, so I didn't know his first name was Hiram until later—"said it must be close to zero. I've got some hot coffee and a warm slice of coffee cake I made. Mr. Holder got some sugar and flour up in Kansas on a trade for something."

"I can't leave Dolly long," I said. "It's too cold."

"Dolly?"

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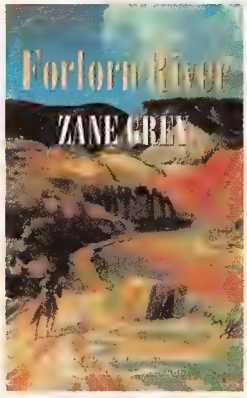

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Foreword by Loren Grey

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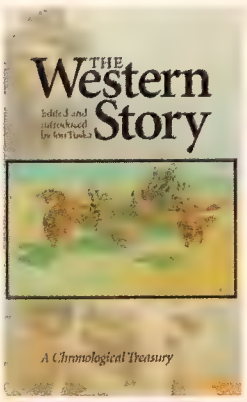

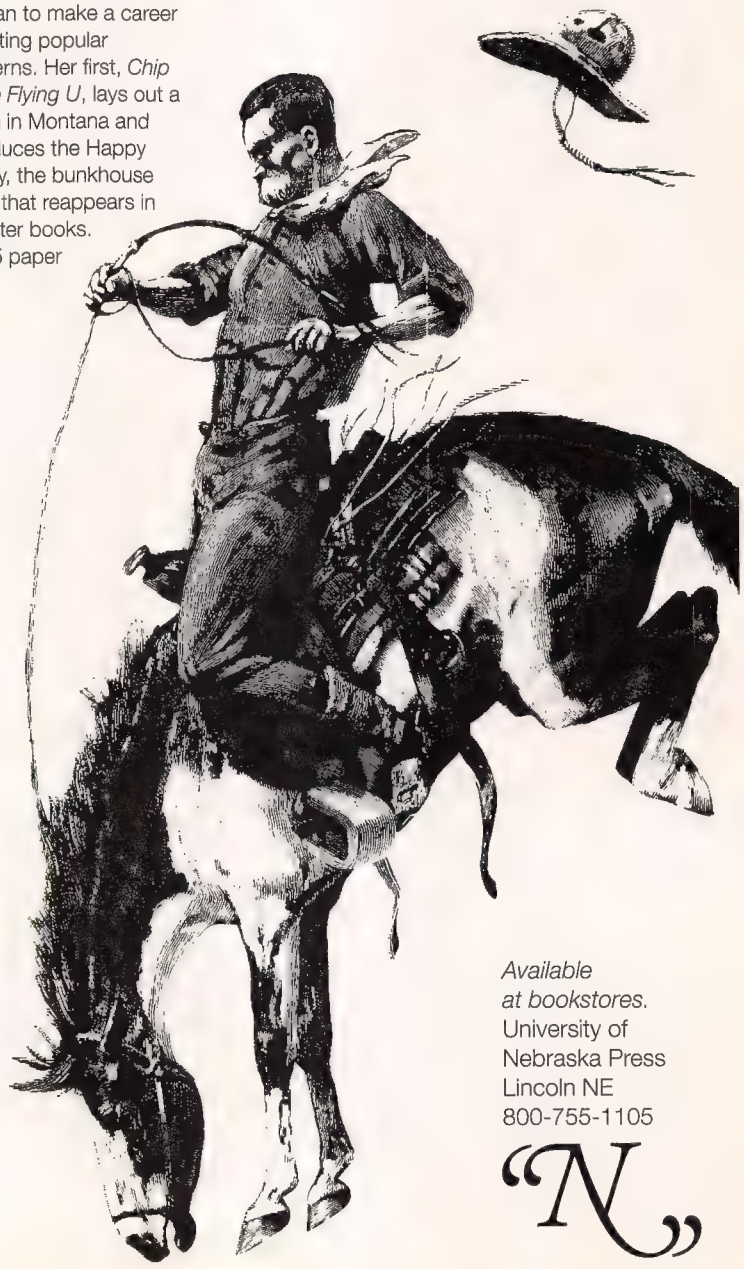

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"YOU MARK MY WORDS, BOBBY," MOM SAID. "THAT MAN NEVER RUN OFF. SOMETHING'S HAPPENED TO HIM, AN' I DON'T RECKON IT'S GOOD."

"My mare."

She sort of peered out into the snow. "I never knew you rode a horse. Don't you have a bicycle?"

I stepped inside where it was warm. "Yes'm, I have one, but we can't get no tires an' I don't wanta ruin the rims," I said.

That kitchen was toasty warm, the coffee was piping hot and she had sugar for it, and that coffee cake was still warm from the oven. It beat cold cornbread and black coffee all holler. "Mr. Holder got up real early," she told me. " 'Betty,' he said—that's my name, Betty—'there's liable to be some hard work gettin' the train on the line this mornin'.' "

"When did he leave, ma'am?" I asked.

"Oh, just a few minutes before you came to the door. I'm surprised you didn't meet him on the street."

When I went back out I noticed that the only tracks I saw in the snow were mine, and they were half full of snow. I couldn't remember seeing any tracks going away from the house when I came up, but then I wasn't looking for any.

I threw my route—the 2:10 finally came in while I was having coffee with Miz Holder—and when I got finished I turned in my wake-up paper.

"You seen Mr. Holder?" Mr. Sanders asked me.

"No, sir," I said. "He was done gone when I got to his house."

"Well, he ain't here," Mr. Sanders said, "an' that ain't a bit like him. Ever'body else is here, but he ain't. Why don't you ride back to his house an' see if maybe he took sick or something an' had to go home."

So I did. When I knocked on the door the second time it took a while for Miz Holder to answer. She looked pretty sleepy, an' I figured she'd gone back to bed after I'd left.

"Did Mr. Holder come back home, ma'am?" I asked.

"No. Why?"

"Well, ma'am, he never got to the depot. Mr. Sanders thought maybe he'd took sick or something an' come back home."

"No," she said. "He ain't here an' I ain't seen him since he left. 'Tain't like Mr. Holder not to go straight to the depot."

Mr. Havey called out the law and I reckon they hunted ever' square foot of ground twixt 131 Blue Jay and the depot, but they never found hide nor hair of Mr. Holder. I went on home an' went to bed—there wouldn't be any school because of the blizzard. About two o'clock Sheriff Walter Grimes himself come to see me.

"What time did you get to Mr. Holder's house this mornin', Bobby?" he asked.

" 'Twixt a quarter past three an' half past. Time's on that paper I turned in."

"Three twenty-six sound right?"

"I reckon."

"Who come to the door?"

"Miz Holder," I said.

"Does Miz Holder come to the door reg'lar?"

"Jus' when he's done gone. I reckon maybe a dozen, dozen an' a half times since I been doin' the wake-up. Mr. Havey, he says Mr. Holder ain't never late. Heard him say it my own self."

"Did Miz Holder say when he left?" the sheriff asked.

"She said she figgered I'd likely met him on the street. I wouldn't of, though. I come down Blue Jay from the north an' he'd be headed south for the depot."

"Did you see anybody walkin' atall?"

"Mr. Walter," I said, "it was so blame cold I had my cap pulled down as far as it'd go an' the earflaps tied under my chin, I had my coat collar plumb up around my ears, an' I was doin' my best to stay on Dolly an' not freeze to death. The only light was from a streetlight a block behind me. Ain't no streetlight on the south end of Blue Jay. The snow an' the wind was blowin' where you couldn't see twenty foot. I don't reckon I'd a seen a feller if he was right 'longside my stirrups."

"Don't reckon you would have. You see any tracks in the snow in front of his house?"

"Wasn't lookin' for none," I said.

"You had a cuppa coffee an' some coffee cake with Miz Holder?"

"Yes, sir."

"See any tracks when you come out?"

"Mine," I said, "an' they was half fulla snow."

"An' you never saw Mr. Holder atall?"

"No, sir," I said. "Never laid eyes on him."

"But it wasn't no rare thing for him to be gone when you got there."

"Well, sorta rare," I said. "Didn't happen real often, but it did happen."

JUMPED ON DOLLY AN' WE HEADED FOR THE DEPOT AT A HIGH LOPE. AS SOON AS I GOT THERE I CALLED MOM AT THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

"Was the house warm when you went in?"

"Yes, sir. Coffee was hot, too, an' that coffee cake was like it just come out. Nice an' warm. Looked like maybe one piece was gone. Reckon he had that for his breakfast."

"Did she have any coffee cake with you?"

"No, sir. She just sipped some coffee. But I never seen her eat no breakfast," I added. "I come in for coffee maybe two, three dozen times since I been doin' this —when he was gone or just leavin'—an' I never seen her do nothin' but drink a little coffee."

Well, Mr. Walter went off after that, but Mom heard a lot. Mr. Holder had his gold watch an' chain an' close on to sixty-four dollars in cash on him when he left home. Miz Holder knew it was close on to sixty-four dollars 'cause when he put his pay in the bank he always held a hundred dollars out, an' he'd give her thirty-six dollars an' the ration books on Saturday, an' he hadn't been no place over the weekend. Mr. Holder had upwards of fifteen hundred dollars in the bank, an' it was still there.

"You mark my words, Bobby," Mom said. "That man never run off. Something's happened to him, an' I don't reckon it's good. A man don't run off with just sixty-four dollars in his pocket an' leave fifteen hundred behind. And, he had a pistol."

"A pistol? I never knew he packed a pistol," I said.

"Well, he did. Miz Holder said he'd been on a train that got held up when he worked on the Southern, an' he's packed a pistol ever since."

"What kinda pistol?"

"Miz Holder didn't know. It was a thirty-eight, though. He had a whole box of shells for it, an' five are gone, which is what the pistol holds. Thirty-eight short. Walter says it sounds like a Baby Russian from how she told about it, but I don't know what a Baby Russian is."

I did. It was a pocket-sized gun, top break, with a stud trigger. Smith & Wesson made it.

"Anyway, Miz Holder says she sewed a special pocket inside his coat for it, an' he always had it with him. She said it was silver, with a black handle."

Nickel and gutta-percha, had to be. Not a bad little gun. Not as good as the big Colt Dad left behind, but not a bad little gun.

The Holders never took the paper, so I never had any reason to go down to 131 Blue Jay anymore. I crossed Blue Jay about a quarter mile north of 131 and rode Dolly across the wooden bridge over Dugan Creek between Blue Jay and Railroad Avenue. Dolly didn't like that bridge a bit. I figured it was on account of the noise it made under her hooves—kinda like poundin' on a big drum.

The sheriff rounded up every bum, 'bo, drifter, an' local lowlife in town an' sweated 'em hard, but none of 'em would own up an' he never found Mr. Holder's watch or gun on none of 'em. One 'bo had near on thirty dollars he couldn't 'count for an' Mr. Walter sweated him *real* hard—he knew that money was stole—but the 'bo claimed he spent Sunday night in ol' man Collins's barn, an' the ol' man said he found him there when he went out to milk Monday mornin' an' he was all tunneled up in the hay an' sound asleep at four.

That snow kept on comin'—all that week an' into the next. It got plumb deep. Countin' all, we had near three foot on the level an' a lot more in drifts. It really drifted deep down in Dugan Creek, except down by the yards, where there was a big pool. That pool froze plumb solid to the bottom. Folks said you could ice-skate on it if you had ice skates, but nobody did. It got so cold the water tower in the yard iced up an' so did the pump, an' Mr. Havey had to get the crews out with blowtorches and what-have-you to get the water going again so the trains could run. Not only did the Tiktok run on that water, there was a water contract with the T&P.

It was the first week in March before we got a break an' the snow commenced to melt, an' the end of the middle week before it was all gone, except in the shady places where it was real deep anyway, like under the wooden bridge on Dugan Creek. On the Monday of the third week in March, Dolly just flat wouldn't cross that bridge atall. Not a bit, she wouldn't. She balked an' threw her head an' backed away like something was gonna get her if she set foot on the bridge. I got down an' walked out on it to show her it was all right, an' then I smelt something.

I tied Dolly to the bridge rail at the Blue Jay end and went down the bank. It was dark down

BETTY HOLDER SAID SHE WAS THIRTY, AN' THERE WAS SOME DRAWED BREATHS OVER THAT, ON ACCOUNT OF MR. HOLDER WAS FIFTY-EIGHT.

there—it was a little before three in the morning—so I lit a match.

God almighty, I never got such a scare in my life! There was Mr. Holder, a-laying on his back in the snow. He had two black spots on his forehead an' his eyes was wide open an' starin' at me. I let out a holler an' come up that bank like the devil hisself was behind me. I jumped on Dolly an' we headed for the depot at a high lope. As soon as I got there I turned on the light an' called Mom at the sheriff's office.

I reckon I was a mite crazy, the way I was a-hollerin' an' a-carryin' on, but Mom got me calmed down an' I told her what I'd found. When I hung up I called Mr. Havey's house an' woke him up. "Mr. Havey," I said, "this-here's Bobby. I done found Mr. Holder. He's dead. Somebody's done up an' kilt him."

When I was in the army years later we had a word for what was goin' on down to the bridge when Mr. Havey an' me come up in that big Packard of his. The word *cluster*'s in it, but the rest of it ain't very nice. We went by 131 Blue Jay, but Walter'd already been there, so we went on up to the bridge. Walter an' both his deputies, ol' Jigger French the night watchman and Seth Walls the JP, Mr. Kennedy the undertaker an' them two 4-Fs that worked for him with the dead wagon, an' maybe half the town was already there. I had to go down an' look at that dead face again long 'nough to say "That-air's him," an' it give me bad dreams awhile. Miz Holder—she was lookin' mighty pale, but she always did; blondes are like that—said "That's Hiram," an' that's when I found out what his Christian name was. Mr. Havey identified him, too. Then them two 4-F's that worked for Mr. Kennedy brought him out under a blanket.

His pockets was turned out an' he didn't have nothin' on him. They'd even took his ticket puncher. Watch an' chain, pistol, money—it was all gone. Miz Holder said he always had two packs of Old Golds in his coat pockets, but they was gone, too, an' so was his matches. One of the deputies said, "Su'prised they didn't take his coat an' britches, and maybe his shoes, too."

Mr. Walter told him not to be too much bigger a fool than he was born. "Them's a railroad conductor's clothes, an' ever' damn fool on the street'll know 'em for that. We got a railroad conductor missin' an' we see a bum wearin' a black frock coat with brass buttons, who we gonna talk to?"

Well, they had a hearin' down to the courthouse, what they call an inquest, an' I had to tell 'em all I knew. I told all 'bout comin' to his house an' findin' he was done gone, an' havin' coffee an' coffee cake with Miz Holder, an' then goin' on down to the depot. I had to say I didn't figure on seein' him at the depot on account of he always went straight to his cars to check 'em an' make sure there wasn't no 'bos hitchin' no rides. Then I had to tell 'bout findin' him on account of Dolly wouldn't cross the bridge, an' how she hadn't liked that bridge ever since we'd been crossin' it.

"An' when was the first time you crossed it?" the lawyer man for the county asked.

"Wednesday mornin' after Mr. Holder didn't show up on Monday," I said. "I was wakin' up the Number 2 crew."

"An' it didn't dawn on you to look under the bridge then?"

" 'Twouldn't a done no good," I said. "Snow down there was up to my neck, might near."

Well, folks chuckled a mite at that an' Mr. Walls the JP banged his little hammer so they shut up. "But you knew the bridge made your horse nervous long before you found Mr. Holder's body."

"Yes, sir. I figured it was the noise it makes under her hooves—sounds like beatin' a big empty barrel—an' the way them boards is springy, sort of, under her. She don't like that kinda footin'."

"But she shied at the bridge the first time you rode across it."

"No, sir, wasn't the first time," I said. "I rode 'crost it last summer, playin' cowboys an' Injuns. She didn't like it then."

"So she already knew the bridge?"

"An' she knew she didn't like it, yes, sir."

After that they took me out of the chair an' Miz Holder got in it. They got out a Bible an' she swore on it, an' then that lawyer feller commenced to askin' her questions.

Her name was Betty Holder, an' her maiden name was Flowers. She was from Chattanooga, Tennessee. She said she was thirty years old, an' there was some drawed breaths over that, on account of Mr. Holder was fifty-

HE DECEASED," DOC CLEPPER SAID, "WAS DONE DEAD WHEN THEM TWO BULLETS WAS SHOT INTO HIS HEAD. SOMEBODY'D BUSTED HIS NECK CLEAN."

eight, an' when she said she'd been married to him for fifteen years there was some more drawed breaths. "I was a chambermaid in a railroad hotel in Chattanooga in 1929," she said. "I made two dollars a week, workin' from half past five in the mornin' until half past five in the evenin', six days a week. I got Sundays off. When Mr. Holder said if I'd marry him he'd keep me fed an' buy me nice clothes an' make sure I always had a warm place to sleep, I said yes right quick."

"Where was Mr. Holder working then?"

"He was a passenger conductor on the Southern."

"How long did he work for the Southern?"

"He'd been a-workin' for 'em 'bout four years when he married me. He quit an' come to work on the Texas-Oklahoma-Kansas in 1942."

"The Southern's a big road," the lawyer said. "I 'magine they paid better than the Tiktok."

"Yes, sir," she said. "Lots better."

"Why would he have quit an' come to work for the Tiktok?"

"Well, sir," she said, "it was like this. There was a brakeman on the Southern who was a-pesterin' me to sleep with him while Mr. Holder was off on a run. I tol' him no, but he kept a-pesterin', so I tol' Mr. Holder. Mr. Holder tol' him to stay away, but he didn't, so Mr. Holder shot him."

"He *shot* the man?"

"Yes, sir. Didn't kill him, though. Jus' shot him in the . . . well, he shot him kinda low in the belly."

"And what happened?"

"Well, the feller, he had some kinfolks, an' they 'lowed as how they was gonna get Mr. Holder, an' Mr. Holder went to the superintendent, an' the superintendent said the Texas-Oklahoma-Kansas needed a conductor, an' all what was goin' on—them fellers runnin' around with guns an' claimin' they was gonna shoot Mr. Holder—maybe it'd be better if he come out here awhile, where they couldn't find us."

"So he came here in 1942 and took over the job LeRoy Schofield got fired from."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you and Mr. Holder have any children?" he asked.

Miz Holder looked real sad, an' it was a little bit before she answered. "We had a little boy," she said. "Born in thirty-one. He died of the diphtheria in thirty-five."

"Was Mr. Holder ever married before he married you?"

"I don't know," she said. "He never said he was, but he never said he wasn't."

"Didn't you ask him?"

"Lord have mercy, no! Mr. Holder, he had a bad temper sometimes. You never knew what might touch him off. I never asked him nothin' 'bout nothin'. Not even what he done on the train."

She told about how Mr. Holder had went to bed at half past five on Sunday, like he always done, an' got up at half past one. "I jus' stayed up till he left," she said. "I always done that. Then I'd go to bed." She fixed his breakfast—the coffee cake with the flour an' sugar he brought her from Kansas, an' some hot coffee, which he took black. He drunk two cups of coffee, looked at his watch, an' said, "Well, Betty, I better not wait for the boy this mornin'. It's plumb nasty out there an' we're liable to have our hands full with tramps tryin' to get warm on the train an' the like." Then he went out the door, an' I knocked on it maybe three or four minutes after he left. She'd just washed his dish and cup. She asked me in for coffee an' coffee cake an' that took maybe ten minutes, an' then I went out an' she went to bed. Next thing she knew I was knockin' on the door askin' her if Mr. Holder had took sick an' come home, but she said, "I was so sleepy I really didn't understand what he was sayin'."

"Had Mr. Holder ever gone off without tellin' you where before?"

"He never told me where he was goin'," she said. "But he never was gone overnight before. An' he *never* missed his train."

"Miz Holder," he said, "it's kind of strange, but nobody's seen you cry over him."

"I done my cryin' over my baby," she said. "I done all the cryin' I had in me in nineteen an' thirty-five."

"Miz Holder," he said, "did you love your husband?"

Judge Walls banged his hammer. "That ain't no proper question," he said.

"It's awright, Judge," she said. "Might as well tell the truth. Mr. Holder was a hard man to live with. He had a bad, bad temper. He never drunk nor nothin', but sometimes he'd take it in his head I was messin' around with men. I never done it, but he'd take it in

"BOBBY, I'VE GOT A PRESENT FOR YOU," BETTY HOLDER SAID. "IT'S IN THE BEDROOM. COME ON AN' WE'LL GET IT."

his head I was. He'd whup me somethin' awful. Then after he done it, he'd commence to cry an' carry on 'bout how much he loved me an' how he didn't wanta live if he ever lost me an' what-all. I never knowed what set him off like that, or when it'd happen. Things'd be goin' jus' fine, an' then all of a sudden he'd take that crazy notion in his head an' I'd get a hidin' for something I never done. No, sir, I can't say I loved a man that done me thataway, but where would I go? Never been to school—I can write my name, but I can't even read a paper. He was all I had, so I stayed with him, but I can't say I loved him."

Walter was next, and he told 'bout me findin' the body an' callin' Mom, an' her callin' him at home. "Miz Holder said he had his gold watch an' chain, his ticket puncher, a Smith an' Wesson pistol with five ca'tridges in it, sixty-four dollars or thereabouts in cash in his pocket, two packs of Old Gold cigarettes in his coat pocket, an' a penny box of matches. He didn't have none of it when we found him."

Then come Doc Clepper. "The deceased," he said, "was done dead when them two bullets was shot into his head. Somebody'd took an' fetched him a clip back of the head an' busted his neck clean."

Well, that set off a buzz an' got the judge to bang his little hammer some more.

"What was he hit with?" the lawyer feller asked.

"Somethin' hard an' 'bout as big around as a man's forearm."

"What do you think it was?"

"Busted-off limb. Chunk a stove wood. Coulda been might near anything. Baseball bat, maybe."

"Can you be any more specific?"

"How? By the time I got him he'd been buried in snow nigh a month. Big bruise on the back of his neck, three vertebrae crushed. My guess is, somebody come up behind him while he was a-walkin', taken a Babe Ruth to the back of his head."

"Why was he shot?"

"You tell me what you think, I'll tell you what I think. We'll both know jus' what we did afore," Doc said.

The coroner's jury found that Mr. Hiram John Holder of 131 Blue Jay Road, McCafferty, Texas, met his death from a blow to the back of the head, an' it was done by an unknown person, which is about all anybody really knew. Walter went out and sweated some more tramps, an' the Tiktok posted a reward of two hundred an' fifty dollars for anybody that could tell who done it, but nobody come for the money.

Well, me a-findin' Mr. Holder dead like 'at was sort of what you call a nine-day wonder, I reckon, but it took longer'n that for the town to get over it. Little town like McCafferty, it talks a lot. All sorta talk, but most of it didn't make no sense. They was them that said a bum done it an' taken Mr. Holder's watch an' pistol an' such, an' the proof was they taken his cigarettes, too, on accounta no bum would leave two perfectly good packs of cigarettes, one of 'em not even open yet, behind.

They was them that said Miz Holder—Betty—had another feller, an' he done Mr. Holder in an' taken his stuff to make it look like it was robbery, an' they was just waitin' for things to die down 'fore they come out in the open. Trouble was, none of them could put a name to the feller—nobody'd ever seen Betty Holder around any man but her husband. Far as I knew, I was the only feller 'sides Mr. Holder that ever got into that little house with her alone when he wasn't there, an' I sure wasn't her feller.

Then they was them that said Miz Holder done it herself, on account of the way he beat on her. Trouble was, none of them could figure out how she up an' hit a six foot five man in the back of the head with a chunk of stove wood an' her only five foot four, an' then how, at about a hundred an' fifteen pounds, she dragged a hundred an' eighty pound man might near two hundred yards through the snow to stash him under that bridge and still got back in time to be in her nightgown an' wrapper an' open the door for me at half past three.

I didn't see Miz Holder much, didn't have no reason to no more, they never had took the papers—but I kinda missed going by 131 Blue Jay an' sometimes gettin' a cuppa hot coffee on a cool mornin' an' once in a while a glimpse of her bosoms or legs. A fourteen-year-old boy is awakenin', you might say, to what women is all about, an' jus' seein' them glimpses was more'n I was liable to see from any gal my own age in McCafferty.

One Saturday mornin' in late April I met up with her face-to-

IN 1964 THE T&P TOOK UP THE TIKTOK TRACKS AN' SOLD OFF THE ASSETS, WHICH INCLUDED THE HOUSE AT 131 BLUE JAY ROAD.

face in the aisle at Benton's Market. She had on a light dress—it was might near summery warm—an' a big straw hat to shade her face. "Why, Bobby," she said, "you ain't been by to see me atall since Mr. Holder died."

"Well, no, ma'am," I said. "Y'all's was the only house on Blue Jay I had to go to for to wake folks up, an' I don't deliver no papers there."

"What are you doin' Sunday mornin' after you finish your papers?" she asked.

"Mostly goin' home an' tryin' to get some sleep. Mom will be asleep, too—she don't get off until seven o'clock, an' when she gets in I'm usually already in bed. We sleep mostly, on Sunday—catchin' up on what we miss durin' the week."

"Well," she said, "when you finish throwin' your Sunday papers an' doin' your wake-ups, why don't you call at my house? I'll fix you a nice Sunday breakfast an' we can say good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

"I'm a-leavin' Tuesday, on the T&P. Mr. Havey, he was kind 'nough to get me a pass that'll take me home to Tennessee. Ain't nothin' for me here, what with Mr. Holder gone. What with his savin's an' his insurance an' what the 'road give me when he was found dead, I'm well 'nough fixed I can go home an' live decent."

Sure enough, Sunday mornin' I showed up at 131 Blue Jay Road at about half past five, when my papers was all thrown an' I'd woke up Mr. Sanders, Mr. Vasery, an' Mr. Brown. She was up—there was lights burnin' inside—an' she come to the door. She was still in her nightie—a light one—an' she had a blue kimono wrapped over it. She told me to come on in, an' I done it.

We sat down at the dinin' room table—first time I'd ever been in that dinin' room—an' she brought me a plate fulla scrambled eggs, two big ol' strips of bacon, an' some hot outta the oven homemade biscuits with real honey to go on 'em. She poured us a couple a cups of coffee, then she sat down next to me an' sipped at hers.

"You're gettin' to be a big boy, Bobby," she said.

"Yes'm."

"Got you a reg'lar girlfriend yet?"

"No'm. I ain't got time for no girlfriend. What with my papers an' my wake-ups ever' mornin' an' school an' jus' tryin' to get my studies done an' get me some sleep, too, I ain't got no time to run aroun' with girls."

"Your dad's overseas, ain't he?" she asked. "I thought I heard somebody say he is."

"Yes'm—an' he's in the Philippines. He's a prisoner if he's still alive."

"My daddy was kilt in the Great War," she said. "I don't remember him much. I was born in nineteen an' fourteen, an' he went off in nineteen an' seventeen an' never come back."

I ate some more eggs. Didn't seem like there was much to say about that.

About the time I finished my plate an' the coffee, she said, "Bobby, I've got a present for you. You've been a friend to me, an' I ain't had many friends in McCafferty. Mr. Holder, he didn't much like it when I had friends—even women friends. He liked you, though. It's in the bedroom. Come on an' we'll get it."

An hour later we were layin' side by side on that bed, neither one of us with a stitch of clothes on. That was the best present I'd ever had up till then.

"Bobby," she said, "I know you're gonna tell your friends about this. Boys talk about things like that."

"No, ma'am," I said, kinda hot about it. "I don't talk 'bout my business to nobody else. Feller tells ever'body his business, sooner or later he ain't got no business of his own."

"You will, though. Jus' don't do it till after I been gone awhile."

I leaned over an' kissed her on the mouth again. "Betty," I said, "I won't never tell *nobody*. Not atall. I jus' wish you wouldn't go back to Tennessee, though."

"You reckon you'd like to do this reg'lar?"

"Well, yes—but I'd jus' like to have you aroun'. I like you."

"Well," she said, "I like you, too—an' that's part of how come I'm goin' back to Tennessee."

She left Tuesday mornin' on the 6:18 eastbound, just like she said she was a-goin' to. I met her on the platform—she was the only passenger waitin'—an' 'fore the train come in, she kissed me again an' let me feel her bosoms. I don't reckon I could lie an' say my eyes was dry when the 6:18 pulled out.

We got the word in forty-five, after General MacArthur went back to the Philippines. Dad was dead, killed in action in forty-two,

I GOT TO WALKIN' AROUND IN THE ATTIC AND SHININ' MY BIG COON-HUNTIN' LIGHT AROUND. I SAW SOMETHIN' AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CHIMNEY WELL.

after MacArthur went to Australia. Mom cried some an' so did I, but we'd been expectin' it for a long time. In forty-six Mom married Walter Grimes.

I went to work for the Tiktok as assistant depot agent as soon as I turned sixteen—part-time, of course, until I finished school—an' give up my paper route an' the wake-ups. The Tiktok paid better. When I graduated I got the relief conductor job—youngest conductor in Texas—an' when ol' man Sanders finally retired when he was eighty-five, I become the depot agent. Then come Korea, an' I went to Mr. Havey an' told him I was gonna enlist.

"Bob," he said—he'd quit callin' me Bobby when I went to work full-time—"You don't have to. Railroad jobs are draft-protected."

"I know," I said, "but my daddy wasn't no slacker an' neither am I. I'm gonna go into the army."

"Well," he said, "when it's over, you'll have a job with me."

When I come back in fifty-three the T&P had bought the Tiktok out an' there wasn't no job, but I didn't want to go back to bein' a depot agent noway. I took my GI bill an' went to a technical school to learn to build buildings, an' when I came back to McCafferty I went into the construction business, which was doin' good, owin' to the oil.

In 1964 the T&P took up the Tiktok tracks an' sold off the assets, an' I bought the old train, Little Nell, which was still sittin' in the yard, an' some other property, which included the house at 131 Blue Jay Road. I hadn't even known the railroad owned it.

I liked that little house. It was right pretty, an' besides, it was kinda special. I reckon where it happens for the first time is always kinda special to a feller if he ain't some sorta nut. I wanted to fix it up, maybe rent it out until my oldest boy got old enough for a place of his own, an' then let him have it as a starter place.

It was just too far gone. The foundation was *bois d'arc*—what we call "bodark"—posts on the ground, not even set in. It couldn't be leveled, an' there was a lot of rot. Besides, the flue had to be completely rebuilt if you were going to use the fireplace. I didn't want to, but I realized the only thing I could do was tear it down.

Now, I don't know if you know what a chimney well is, but all proper-built houses that have inside brick flues have chimney wells. It's a space just big enough for a skinny feller with a hod of mortar to climb down to chink the bricks in the flue. I got to walkin' around in the attic—you could stand up in that eight-twelve pitch—an' shinin' my big coon-huntin' light around, an' I shined it down the chimney well. There was somethin' at the bottom—a sort of a package-looking thing.

I sent Ned—that's my second boy, the skinniest an' the family monkey—down the chimney well on a rope to bring it up. Lord knows, it could have been some money or something somebody hid in that place long ago. Back when Roosevelt called in the gold a lot of folks hid gold coins. That house was built about 1900, so it coulda been anything.

I wasn't prepared for what it was. It was an old towel, tied up with string. Inside I found a B. W. Raymond railroad watch on a gold chain, a Tiktok ticket punch with the initials HJH scratched on it, a nickel-plated .38 Smith & Wesson Baby Russian with black grips, two empty shells an' three live ones in the cylinder, two real old packs of Old Golds—one wasn't open—and a penny box of Fire Chief matches. The towel had some powder stains on it an' two bullet holes in it. I took the package to Walter, who retired as county sheriff in 1960.

"Ahbedamn," he said. "I will be damn'. So she done it herself."

"Looks thataway," I said.

"Damn," he said. "Well, I can't say it s'prises me a helluva lot. She planned it real good, didn't she?"

"Why not," I asked, "an' how long you reckon she had it in mind?"

"She wouldn't be the first one to do in a feller that beat her. Run off or kill the son of a gun, that's 'bout all the choices a woman had in forty-four. As far as how long, no way to tell. I figure she probably did him in Saturday when he come home—likely knocked him in the head with a stick of stove wood, then burned it. It was colder'n a bear's behind even then, though it didn't snow till Sunday."

"What'd she do with him?"

"Like as not, she hid the carcass in the woodshed. Remember, nobody'd be lookin' for him till Monday. We all knew that snow was a-comin' that weekend, so she just waited till after dark Sunday night in the snow an' then she dragged him up under the bridge

"BETTY HOLDER DIDN'T HAVE NO WAY OUT—NO MONEY, NO KIN, NO FANCY MAN, NO NOTHIN'," WALTER SAID.

an' laid him out. She knew she didn't dare keep anything that was on him except maybe his money, so she stashed it all in the chimney well. Last place in the world anybody'd look. Takin' them cigarettes an' his matches took real plannin'. She wanted it blamed on a bum or a 'bo, an' no bum or 'bo woulda left cigarettes an' matches behind. If them cigarettes an' matches'd been on him when you found the body, I'd a smelt a rat right off."

"How come she shot him, too?"

"Maybe 'cause she thought he wasn't dead an' wanted to make sure. Maybe 'cause she figured them two slugs in his head would take attention away from his busted neck. Maybe she just hated him so much she couldn't leave off without blowin' his brains out. No way to tell."

"Why didn't she just leave him?" I asked.

"Likely she couldn't—didn't have no way. You 'member Myrtle Vernon? George Vernon's ex-wife? He used to be county clerk before the war. I bet I made four or five stops a month at their place. George was beatin' on Myrt. Hell, she had a loose string in her bloomers—we all knew that—but if you was to ask me if he beat her on accounta her foolin' 'round or she fooled 'round on accounta he beat on her, I couldn't tell you. Anyway, when she took off in thirty-nine I really thought he'd beat her so bad he killed her an' hid her body, but when he got them divorce papers from Reno I had to back off on that.

"Myrt run off, but she had a way to do it. Somebody sent her the money for a train ticket. We traced her to Mineral Wells on the T&P, an' then she disappeared. The Palo Pinto County sheriff found out a woman answerin' Myrt's description was met at the depot by a man drivin' a blue Cord

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coupe. Only feller Myrt ever knew that drove a Cord was that greetin' card man.

"Betty Holder didn't have no way out—no money, no kin, no fancy man, no nothin'. Like as not he'd beat her that week—maybe 'fore he left Monday or when he come in Tuesday, or 'fore he left Friday. Maybe he'd told her she was gonna get a beatin' when he come in Saturday—that's 'bout as likely as we'll get. She was a-layin' for him, an' when he come in she slammed him with that stick of stove wood. Busted his neck, drug the carcass out to the woodshed an' stashed it there, then hid it under the bridge in the snow."

"What you reckon we oughta do about it?" I asked.

"Not a damn thing," he said.

"Walter, it was cold-blooded murder—an' she got away clean. An' she planned it, too."

"Yep," he said, "an' that was twenty years ago. She went back to Tennessee—maybe—an' maybe she just stopped in Tennessee long 'nough to change her drawers. She had better'n six thousand dollars on her—that fifteen hundred he had in the bank, two two-thousand-dollar insurance policies, an' the five hundred that come from the Tiktok an' a local collection—an' God knows where she is now. God knows what name she's usin'. She coulda gone a helluva long way on six thousand dollars in nineteen an' forty-four. We don't have a fingerprint, we don't even have a picture. Even if we had a picture, it'd be twenty years old, maybe older. She's fifty now—folks change a lot 'twixt thirty an' fifty, 'specially women. Findin' her'd be like lookin' for one needle in a whole field fulla haystacks."

"So we just forget it?"

"Yep."

I've got me a real nice B. W. Raymond railroad watch I wear on Sundays an' when me an' my wife go out. I've got a good little S&W Baby Russian in my gun collection. The ticket punch I sold to a railroad collector in Fort Worth. I threw the cigarettes an' matches away—they wasn't no good anyway—an' the towel with 'em. I built a two-bedroom house at 131 Blue Jay Road, an' there's a nice couple rentin' it. Ever' now an' then I take out my gold B. W. Raymond watch that I wear on my gold chain, an' I think about a blond gal name of Betty an' an April Sunday mornin' in the bedroom of a little house that ain't there no more at 131 Blue Jay Road.

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MOURNING GLORY

Glory was buried at midmorning on Thursday, just as the heat threatened to become stifling. It was probably how she would have wanted it, for morning had always been her favorite time. Morning was when the day was new and fresh and anything was possible; when energies were not yet spent and dreams could still be remembered.

Mark had jokingly referred to her as his "Morning Glory." When the mood struck him, which was not often, he would present her with some of the flowers of the same name. He would tell her that the connection was not that her name was Glory but because, like the winding, weedlike plant that produced the flowers, she was always underfoot and into something.

He carried no flowers with him today. It was far too late for them, and they had never done him any good in the long run, anyhow.

by Troy D. Smith

Neither did Mark Stewart wear his badge. He had it tucked into his vest pocket. Like the flowers, the tin star had done neither him nor Glory any good. The time was past for flowers and laws. Naked as he felt without the symbol of his office, he could not wear it again until he had taken care of his unfinished business.

He turned his back on the grave when the workmen began tossing dirt into it. He tried to ignore the terrible sound of the soil falling upon Glory's coffin, covering her from his sight forever. He distracted himself from reality by reviewing the facts. He recognized the absurdity of such a statement; it was the kind of thing that Glory would have said about him.

> Glory wound up being on a stagecoach that was robbed by the Thatcher gang. They had abducted her.

Glory ran—*had* run—the dance hall in Marleyville. She had been the most popular dancer there when Mark had taken the sheriffing job ten years earlier.

They had fallen in love, sort of. Mark assumed that was what it was, although he rarely tried to put words to it. There had been a little scandal at first, but it soon blew over. She was only a woman of low morals, after all, and he was only a law officer. Respectable people did not really care what they did.

Despite Glory's profession, or perhaps because of it, she had a strong maternal instinct. She had always wanted to get married and raise a houseful of kids. Mark had offered to marry her if it would make her feel any better. He had meant it, too. But she refused to even consider it, unless he first gave up his dangerous profession.

Not to say that Marleyville was a hotbed of crime and contention, but it did have its moments. He scoffed and said that if she really wanted to marry him, it would not matter what he did for a living. She in turn said she wanted to be a wife, not a widow-in-waiting.

And so it went, year after year, with him proposing and her saying no. It was a very comfortable arrangement, from where he sat. It was almost like being married, only without the headaches.

Except that the last time he had proposed to her, she had done more than just say no. She had cleared out of town in a huff, vowing never to come back.

She wound up being on a stagecoach that was robbed by the Thatcher gang, a notorious band of cutthroats. They had abducted her.

Two weeks of searching and tracking had turned up nothing. She was finally found by a rancher a couple of counties over. He had been through Marleyville on business before, and had recognized her. He had found her floating facedown in the Nueces, with a bullet in her back.

Mark had vowed not to rest until he found Sam Thatcher and his cronies and put a bullet in each of them.

The sound of the spades slicing into the earth had finally stopped, and Mark turned for a final look at the grave. He got a surprise.

Someone had placed half a dozen morning glories on the fresh dirt.

Mark had no idea who would be inclined to do a thing like that. Aside from himself, there was no one left in the town who would know her as anything more than a passing acquaintance. It could have been a secret admirer, he supposed, or someone she had done a favor for in times past. He was not going to dwell on it—he had more important matters to consider.

He rode out of town without looking back, heading in the same direction as the stage that had carried Glory away. She had not told him where she was going, but he knew it was on this route. He had seen the stage leave on that late afternoon; he had watched it secretly from the window of his office.

He did not know where he was going to begin his search for the outlaws. He only knew that he was going to find them. There were still a few nooks that the posses had not examined, many of them on the other side of the border. Even if that turned up nothing, the killers were bound to slip up eventually. It was human nature. When they did, he would be waiting. He had the time.

Mark had left Marleyville's delicate moral and judicial situation in the hands of his only deputy, Freddie Post. He trusted Freddie to at least not make matters in the town any worse than they already were. If Mark stayed gone very long, the town council would have to find a more competent replacement for him.

He was not sure if he would ever return, even if he finished his quest. He would have left the ramshackle town years ago, if not for his desire to be near Glory. With her dead, there was nothing to keep him there. He was free.

Freedom had come differently from what he would have hoped. He found that he was not enjoying it very much.

His thoughts were disrupted by a sudden, familiar sound, which caused his spine to chill. It was the cocking of a gun.

"Take it easy there, lawman," said a voice from behind him. The tone was not unfriendly; in fact, it sounded almost amused. It was the intent that gave the sheriff cause for concern.

"You just keep your hands on those reins where I can see 'em," the stranger continued. "Then turn yourself around, right easy like."

Mark did as he was instructed. When he was finally facing his adversary, his eyes widened with surprise, then narrowed again in fury.

It was Sam Thatcher, the very man he had been looking for. The outlaw leader sat leisurely in the

saddle of a palomino, a Winchester aimed steadily at the lawman's heart. "Howdy," Thatcher said.

"Ain't nobody ever got the drop on me like that," Mark said, his tone neutral. He was actually very taken aback, but he did not want his opponent to see that.

"I figured as much," Thatcher said. "Otherwise, you'd be good and dead by now, I reckon."

They simply stared at each other for a good long while. Mark noticed that the outlaw's left arm hung unnaturally limp at his side. He stared into the bore of the rifle, looking for the right opportunity to throw himself aside and draw his revolver.

"I'd put this rifle down, Stewart, if I could trust you not to shoot at me when I do."

Mark stared in disbelief. "Why on earth shouldn't I shoot at you? I was tryin' to find you for that very purpose. Now that you're right here in front of me, I aim to do my best to kill you."

"If you do that, you won't never find the ones that killed Glory."

"You killed Glory."

Thatcher shook his head sadly. "Not at all, partner. Fact is, I tried to save her." Seeing Mark's disbelief, he lowered his weapon. "We're wastin' time, amigo. I'm gonna put this gun down while I tell you the whole story. If you try to plug me before I'm done talkin', you ain't the man I thought you were."

"All right, then. Talk."

Thatcher took a deep breath and began. "I had me nine boys runnin' with me, workin' out of a little hole in the wall just over the border in Mexico. We hit trains, took cattle, whatever might show us some cash for our trouble.

"I sent four fellows to hit that stage in Austin, and I took the other boys with me to rob the bank in Laredo. Folks down there had caught on to us somehow, and when we showed up, they was waitin'. We was lucky to make it out of there. As it was, we lost two good men.

"Them other four boys, though, they robbed that stage and took Glory off of it. The driver got to bein' overprotective, and they shot him down. We don't make a habit of stealin' women. Never done it before, in fact. But these were new recruits, so to speak, and I hadn't brung 'em around to my way of thinkin' yet.

"Anyway, I come into camp bringin' nothin' with me but our own dead. Charlie and his three boys come in with a trunk full of money and a pretty girl. My leadership was bein' seriously undermined. I tried to convince 'em to let the girl go, but all of a sudden they wasn't listenin' to me much anymore.

"So I stayed close to her, to make sure none of 'em tried nothin'. I finally figured out they was just workin' up the nerve to put a bullet in my head and take what they wanted.

"It went on that way for days, though. Stayin' up most of every night, sleepin' with one eye open. Talkin'."

Thatcher's story seemed to bog down, as if he were struggling to find the proper words.

"Go on," Mark urged him coldly.

"And we fell in love."

Thatcher's rifle swung back up, and just in time. Mark's revolver had almost cleared leather. The lethal rifle bore was now staring Mark right in the face, and the outlaw's tone of voice was no longer friendly.

"Stop it!" Thatcher ordered, and Mark's hand froze.

Still not releasing the butt of his gun, Mark snarled, "You're lyin'! This is all some kind of trick."

"If it was a trick, you idiot, I would have already blown your stubborn head off. Now you just listen to me!" Thatcher's face was contorted with emotion, and not all of it was rage. "For once in your thick-headed life, just *listen* to what somebody's sayin'!"

Mark released the pistol grip. "I know all about you," Thatcher told him. "And I know all about her. How she always wanted to be respectable, dance in the theater. How her daddy died when she was five. How she had a dog named Jack that got bit by a rattler."

"I never knew she had a dog," Mark said, his hands limp now. "But that don't mean you *knew* her. How long was you acquainted with her, a week?"

"Ten days," Thatcher replied defensively.

"We don't make a habit of stealin' women," Thatcher said. "Never done it before, in fact. But these were new recruits, so to speak."

"I knew her for ten years."

"There was a lot of livin' in them ten days," Thatcher said, his rifle still not lowered. "How much livin' did you do with her?"

This was met by silence, which lengthened to the point that it was embarrassing. The Winchester pointed away once more. After a few moments, Mark softly said, "If you was as attached to her as you say, how come you're alive and she ain't?"

Thatcher looked away from the sheriff's eyes, scrutinizing the horizon behind him. "We knew we didn't have much time left, so when we seen a chance we took it. I had to kill a couple of 'em. Men I rode with for years. But I knew they was plannin' to give the same treatment to me.

"We were on the run for days, and we thought we had got away. But then they caught up with us as we was crossin' the Nueces. We didn't even know they were there. That's where they shot Glory in the back and gave me this." He nodded toward his limp arm. "They headed back home and sent one man to make sure of us. This here is his horse and gear. He won't be needin' it."

Mark's face had not softened. "Did you ride all the way out here to tell me that? If you did, you wasted your time."

"We're partners until your friends are all dead," Mark said to Thatcher. "But the minute they are, I'm arrestin' you."

Thatcher shook his head, looking straight at Mark now. "What I told you earlier is true. You can't even find those killers without me, let alone take 'em on. And unfortunately, I can't take 'em alone, either. We both want 'em dead. I can take you right to their back door."

Mark chewed his mustache pensively. Four desperate killers, holed up across the border, did present some problems. He could probably get two of them, maybe even three. But he knew that the odds were very long that he could get all four.

"You've got a deal," he said, though the words galled him. "We're partners until your friends are all dead. But the minute they are, I'm arrestin' you and takin' you to Laredo to hang. I've got plenty of papers on you, and I know you ain't the Robin Hood you make yourself out to be."

He reined his horse back around and headed south, ignoring the Winchester that he knew was pointed at his back.

"Just so's you know," he called over his shoulder. "Now come on, we're burnin' daylight."

"Just so's *you* know," he heard the voice call back, "when my friends are all dead I'm gonna send you to join them."

For the next two days they traveled south, crossing the Rio Grande on the morning of the second day. At camp each night they sat alone, brooding in silence. Thatcher held a bottle of whiskey that he nipped at occasionally. He never offered any to his companion.

They communicated no more than absolutely necessary, which was not very much. They spoke more to their horses, in fact, than to each other.

At the end of the second day, Thatcher set up camp early, then sat down and began cleaning his guns.

"If we break camp around three o'clock," he explained, "we'll be at their hideout at dawn. I figured we could turn in early, get a good night's sleep. I hate gettin' shot at when I'm only half awake."

Mark nodded wordlessly and dismounted. He dropped down unceremoniously to the dirt and began eating the last of the jerky he had brought. They were too close now to risk a fire. He wondered briefly if Thatcher had any food. He hoped not.

Thatcher was loading his weapons, humming absently. Mark cast an irritated glance at him.

"You sure seem cheerful," Mark said. "I just hope you ain't forgot our deal."

"You mean that tomorrow mornin's business is just a preliminary to our shootin' each other? I ain't forgot. It's about the kind of deal I expected out of you, to be honest."

Mark grunted. "I still ain't sure I believe that tale you spun about you and Glory."

"I don't care what you believe."

"I've been givin' it some thought, see," Mark continued, ignoring the interruption. "And it just don't make sense. It ain't like Glory to take up with somebody that quick. Besides, she left me 'cause I live too dangerously to suit her. Said she couldn't stand the worryin' anymore. Now why on earth would she say that, and then run off with some outlaw?"

Mark's expression showed that he really was confused. He had been holding these questions inside, mulling over them, for two days. He had intended never to ask them aloud at all, but they had burned away at him until he could stand it no more.

"I wasn't gonna be an outlaw no more," Thatcher said. "I was gonna change."

Mark snorted. "Men like you and me don't ever change, and you know it."

Thatcher shrugged. "Maybe not," he said. "But I was aimin' to at least try. As for not bein' like Glory to latch onto somebody so quick, how would you know? She spent ten years waitin' on you to latch back. Maybe nobody ever gave her a chance to latch on quick before."

"I reckon you're the one that put those flowers on her grave."

"The heavenly blue morning glories," Thatcher said, nodding wistfully.

"I used to call her my Morning Glory," Mark said. "It was because—"

"I know, I know," Thatcher cut him off. "Because she was always underfoot and into something. Like a clinging vine. But those ain't the right words."

Mark felt his face reddening. He felt like daring Thatcher to come up with words that were better, but was certain that he already had.

"She was a morning glory," Thatcher said, "because mornin' glories bloom out in the early hours of the day, just like she used to. There's no place they won't grow. Anything gets in their way they just climb over it real graceful like. But by the afternoon, they've faded out; and in just a few days they're dead and gone. But for those few hours, they're the most beautiful things in the world."

"I'm sick and tired of your talk," Mark informed him. "Accordin' to you, everything I know about Glory is wrong, and you knew her better."

"That ain't my fault," Thatcher said drily. "I ain't the one you ought to be mad at. I reckon you know who that is, without me havin' to tell you."

Mark stood slowly, his face betraying no emotion but his knuckles showing white. "What I still want to know is, if I was so bad for her, and you were so good, why is she dead?"

"I don't know," Thatcher said sadly. "I wish I did." Then, noticing that Mark was still looming over him, he said brusquely, "Go to bed and leave me alone."

Sleep did not come easily to Mark. As he looked up at the full moon, he realized that this was the same route that Glory and the outlaw had taken in their bid for escape. He imagined the terror she must have felt, and the thought was too painful for him to dwell on. But then he thought: what if she felt, not terrified, but secure? That thought was more painful still.

They rose two hours before dawn and prepared to finish their journey. Mark reflected on the Old Testament verses about the "Avenger of Blood"—the murder victim's next of kin who was morally entitled to take revenge if the killer did not go immediately into a City of Refuge and turn himself in. He was not sure if that passage still applied, but he was ready to make it apply in this particular case.

"Thatcher," he said softly, "we have our differences, and before the day's out it'll be us against each other, but what we have to do this mornin' we have to do together, all the way. We're doin' it for Glory."

"There's nothin' we can do that'll be any good to Glory now," Thatcher said bitterly. "We had our chance to do somethin' for Glory, and we missed it. This thing we're doin' is for ourselves. I plan to enjoy every bit of it."

Thatcher spurred his palomino forward, into the darkness.

They rode silently in the moonlight, the ground before them growing steeper and steeper. At length Thatcher held up his hand and reined in his mount.

"This it?" Mark whispered. "I don't see nothin'."

"It's a little ways up," Thatcher explained. "This pal of mine is well acquainted with their horses. We wouldn't want them to have any joyous reunions whilst we're tryin' to sneak into camp. We'll leave the horses here and walk the rest of the way."

They did just that, and just over the rise they encountered a steep drop-off. In the valley below was the killers' camp. It consisted of one rickety cabin and a corral that held four horses.

"We had our chance to do somethin' for Glory, and we missed it," Thatcher said bitterly. "This thing we're doin' is for ourselves."

"Good," Thatcher muttered. "They're all here."

Looking at the horizon, Mark said, "It'll be light soon."

Thatcher nodded. "They never did have much ambition. I remember when thieves were more enterprisin'. I swear, sometimes I think the whole profession is goin' downhill."

Mark was not listening to the whispered words. He was moving forward.

"Hey!" Thatcher hissed. "What do you think you're doin'?"

"Goin' down there to kill 'em."

"You can't just walk in and start shootin'!" Thatcher said indignantly.

"Why not? They're probably asleep."

"They won't be, once you start shootin' at 'em. We have to have a plan of attack. How good are you with one of these?" He tossed the rifle to the lawman.

"Pretty good," Mark said.

"All right. I'm gonna work my way around the back of the cabin, and then sneak down till I'm right behind it. Old Joss gets up every

mornin' shortly after dawn and eases nature. You can set your watch by it. When he does, plug him. They'll all have their attention diverted to these hills, and I'll pop up in the back window and let 'em have it. Any questions?"

"This is your rifle," Mark said. "Why don't you stay up here and use it?"

"Because I know my way around back there. I'm not as likely to trip or do anything to announce myself. Can you handle your part?"

One of the killers burst through the door, diving to the ground before Mark could get a good bead on him.

"I'll handle it. Don't worry."

Mark sat stock-still and watched the cabin for signs of life. A few minutes later, by the faint light of dawn, he saw a dark figure move out of the trees and across the clearing toward the back of the building. Everything was in place. All that was missing was Joss.

A few minutes later he made his appearance. A grizzled old man in dirty long johns, he stumbled outside in the dim light, stretched his joints, tousled his hair, and looked around lazily.

Mark brought the rifle up and put the old man in his sights. Somehow, whether it was the motion of the gun or the faint sunlight reflecting off its barrel, Joss saw him.

Mark was too far away to see the expression on the old man's face, but he saw the way he stiffened in shock. In that moment, Mark held the man's life in his hands. The time it took to squeeze the trigger seemed like an eternity. As on so many earlier occasions, Mark felt the enormity of the power at his fingers.

Then it was over. A sharp crack echoed through the valley, and Joss pitched over dead.

There were shouts from inside the cabin, and the sound of windowpanes being broken. Not content to sit still and be a distraction, Mark scurried down the hill in search of cover. He reasoned that this would give the killers something definite to focus on and bring them into closer range. In reality, though, his reason was that he could not be still when the shooting started.

They were firing at him in earnest now, and he wondered briefly if it really had been a trick. There was still no sign of Thatcher.

There soon was a sign. Mark could hear gunshots from behind the cabin and the surprised shouts from inside. One of the killers burst through the door, diving to the ground before Mark could get a good bead on him. As Mark fired he saw the dust jump from the man's hip. Before he could finish the killer, the man was around the corner.

No one was shooting at Mark now, so he scrambled toward the back of the cabin. There he found Thatcher, who stood before the back window, his guns smoking. The killer who had been wounded by Mark was coming from around the back corner, pistol drawn.

"Look out!" Mark shouted, but he was too late. Thatcher was shot in the back and fell sprawling into the dust. Furiously working the lever of the Winchester, Mark shot the killer and kept shooting him, long after he was dead.

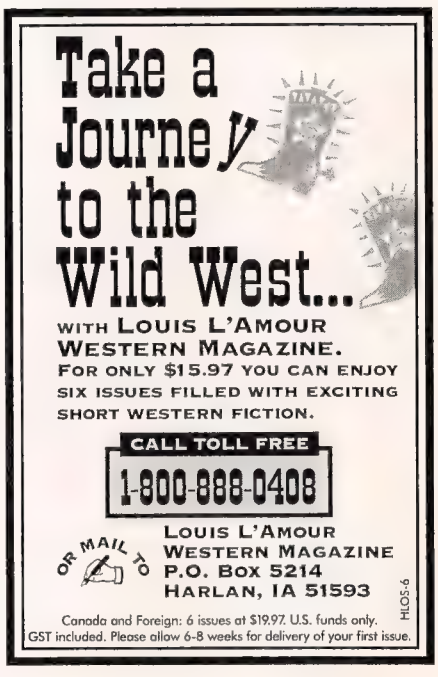
Throwing the rifle aside and drawing his six-gun, Mark knelt beside his partner. Thatcher had breathed his last. Looking inside the cabin, he saw that the two remaining outlaws would not be going anywhere soon, either.

Mark never even thought about burying the killers. He had never left anyone for the buzzards before, but today he would. Sam Thatcher, on the other hand, was a different matter.

He lashed Thatcher to his horse and took him to Marleyville. When he had buried Glory he had thought he could never be any lonelier; on the long trip back, however, he found himself wanting to talk about Glory, and there was no one to talk about her with. Mark was the last living person in the world that had ever loved her.

They buried Sam Thatcher on Monday evening, in the rain. Mark had them bury him next to Glory. There was a little scandal at first, but it soon blew over.

She had only been a woman of low morals, after all, and he was only a former law officer. Respectable people had never really cared what they did.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THE PRISONER OF GUZZLER'S GULCH

by Brent Hart

I reckon I'd better start this story right off by saying that I was a sickly sort of kid back East. It galls me to say it but I didn't have the stamina for haying, butchering, or even a thing as simple as planting. Thanks to my being so puny I spent most of my youth helping my ma do the cleaning, washing, and cooking around the house. I could do that sort of work well enough.

When I was eighteen Ma died from consumption and suddenly I was alone. Alone and feeling useless because I didn't know a whole lot about the world of men. Over the years I'd got healthy enough, but I didn't get exposed to a lot of the things that men did. I reckon I was what my pa had labeled me—galish. My father had long since given up on me and my brothers just joshed me and cuffed me around a lot.

Then I heard about California and it lit a flicker of hope in my skinny bosom. Folks said that the air was so pure out there and the climate so healthful that even a dead man would get

Right off, I figured I'd never be a miner. From the knees down the water froze me and from the waist up the sun baked me.

well if you moved his coffin to the Sierras. They said that Californians hardly knew what a cemetery was and they often had to beat old people to death just to keep the population on an even keel. On top of all that they had discovered so blamed much gold out in the mountains that they were cobblestoning the streets of San Francisco with it.

I figured right off that the West was the place for me. I saddled my riding horse, packed the mule I'd bought for five dollars, and headed for Missouri. The hell of it was that the wagon masters didn't want a skinny little runt like me on their trains and I had to work in a St. Louis hotel for a whole year until the spring of 1852 when I found a group of California-bound farmers willing to take me along. I reckon there ain't many folks of today who took a wagon train west, but the less said about that kind of misery the better. Still, I got there and in the spring of 1853 I met up with Red Eye Johnson at the town of Hang Tree in the Stanislaus gold country.

"Wal," he said, squinting at me through his good right eye. There was a patch over the other one. "I reckon you'll do. You're a mite on the puny side fer mining, but we do need another man. I guess we kin settle fer half a one."

Happy as a hog in a slop trough, I joined him and two other men, Thad Galt and Stub Doyle, and the four of us towed a pack mule named Flower into the country of the Stanislaus River to seek our fortunes.

Right off, I figured I'd never be a miner. From the knees down the water froze me and from the waist up the sun baked me; and while all this was going on, the blasted bugs ate me alive. I was just one big welt of bug bites when I curled up for the night in the little cabin we'd built.

Such never bothered my companions.

Red Eye, whose unpatched right eye had perpetually red whites, was so constantly full of his namesake that if a skeeter dared to bite him and flew away the poor insect would fall into a drunken spin and crash gasping in the weeds. Thaddeus, who was closer to my age than the other two, was referred to by those elderly souls as "book larned." They had discovered that about him when they saw him write his name on a mining claim. If that wasn't the clincher to his having a higher intellect, both the boys swore that they had not only seen him *read* a letter, but he had *answered* it and never once chewed on his lower lip and looked blank. The final member of our group was Stub Doyle, who wasn't even Irish. He took the name when he made his escape from his wife in Ohio and the "Stub" had been tacked on later because he was shorter than a schoolmaster's temper.

I found some gold, but not enough to start a stampede, until finally it was my turn to cook. Everyone had to take a turn at cooking for the others who were busy panning and rocking the gold out of the dirt. Nobody liked that job so what we usually ate was sow belly, beans, and coffee, coupled with biscuits so hard you could break a rabbit's neck with them at twenty yards. In fact, Red Eye asked Stub, the biscuit butcher, if he could make them up in fifty-four caliber so he wouldn't have to mold bullets for his rifle. It got so that by the end of a week of this sort of fare we would have welcomed a fried Indian, if there were any around. That, of course, was barring Pawnee Joe, who was usually so pickled in alcohol that just the thought of making a meal of him would give a man heartburn.

"All right, Skinny," Red Eye said one night. "Tomorrow you git ta cook."

Skinny was a fond nickname they had tacked on me and it was a sight more kindly than what my brothers had called me.

In the morning I got up early and whipped up a breakfast of bacon and eggs, together with what was left of Stub's cannonball biscuits, and a pot of coffee. They ate in silence, only taking time to soak the biscuits in coffee so they could eat them. Red Eye wasn't all that dainty in his eating—he usually bashed them with the butt of his Colt. Finally they trooped off down the river to mine gold.

Dinner was up to me.

I took stock of our supplies and got a shrinking feeling in my stomach. Hog and hominy was beginning to wear on me and I decided that since I was cook I didn't have to stand for it. I borrowed Stub's Hawkin rifle and shot a deer.

After I brought it back to the

cabin and skinned it I sliced off a nice roast and took it into the kitchen. I rooted through our supplies until I found a bottle of cheap red wine that Thad had figured to make croup tonic out of. I dumped a few cups of that into a deep crockery bowl, chopped up an onion with some wild garlic, and threw that and the roast in to soak. While the deer meat was working I went out into the woods and hunted up some miner's lettuce, some wild onion, and some dandelion leaves that were still young and tender. I mixed this and some rose hips into a salad, spiced it up with some wild mustard, and added a sprinkle of cider vinegar to add a tangy touch.

I mixed up a batch of sourdough biscuits and set them to bake at the fireplace while I went out and butchered up the rest of the deer. After I'd hung it up for future meals, I made sure that the roast was well marinated before hanging it over the fire to cook. The winter I'd spent working in that St. Louis hotel was coming in pretty handy.

I was as proud as a buck deer in rutting season when the boys came home and I sat them down to deer roast as tender as a baby's butt, wild greens salad, biscuits as fluffy as a new snowfall, and coffee, together with a bowl of pine nuts to nibble on afterward.

Silence clung to the room like a river fog.

There was only the determined sound of eating and the clatter of a knife or a fork, together with an occasional belch of pleasure, while their attack upon the food was as complete as an Indian massacre.

Finally Stub pushed himself away from the table and slipped a notch or two on his belt. "By God," he muttered and rubbed the black bush on his chin. "I ain't tasted vittles like this since I left the East."

"Amen," Thad said through a mouthful of roast.

"Son," Red Eye said, grinning, "that's the best damn food I've et since I come to the mines. I figger we oughta keep ya on as permanent cook. Right, boys?"

They grunted approval.

"Now, just a damn minute," I said. "I come here ta find gold, not ta cook."

"Yeah," Red Eye said, "but figger it this way. You're a puny little bastard, at best. Grubbin' around in the water will likely kill you. So you do the cookin' an' us boys will kick in part of our gold fer your work. An' we'll pay fer the supplies. Right, men?"

"Right."

"I dunno," I said.

"Now, looky here, ya skinny little runt," Stub Doyle said in a kindly tone, "do the damn cookin'. If we all cut in a third of our dust, you'll be gittin' well paid. Right, men?"

"Right."

"There, ya see. What the blazes is wrong with that?"

"Well, I'll need more stuff ta cook with."

"Fine," Red Eye said. "Go on down ta Hang Tree an' git what ya need. Load the danged mule up."

"We'll stay here," Thad said, "an' work the claim on Guzzler's Gulch, an' set aside your cut."

"Guzzler's Gulch?"

"Yeh. That's what we're callin' the claim."

I expect that was as good a name as any when you stopped to figure Red Eye's consumption of alcohol.

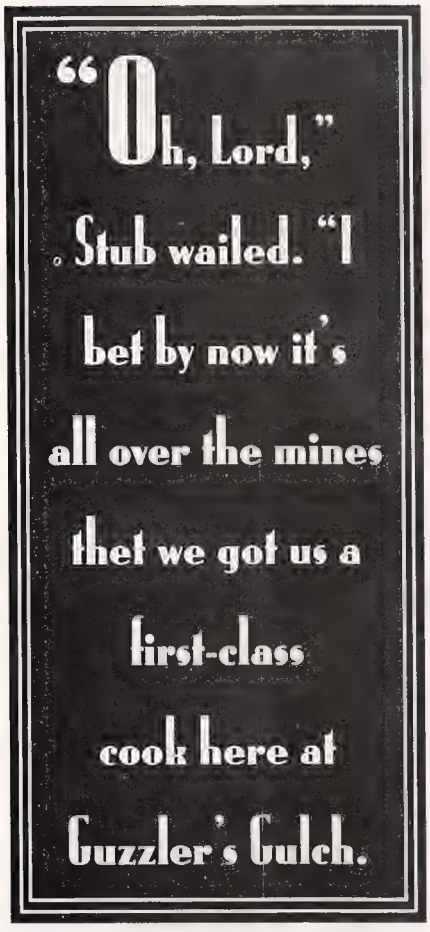
"Cook us up a big kettle o' stew," Doyle suggested, "before ya go into town fer supplies. We'll make do until ya git back."

So I built a big kettle of stew to help them stave off the pangs of starvation and, while it simmered over the fire, I took the hobbles off Flower's front feet and the two of us set out for Hang Tree.

The miners had surely named that place well, since there was nearly always some scruffy looking character dangling from the big oak tree at the edge of town. The fellow who graced one of the lower branches as I towed the mule onto the main street was a big, red-bearded man whose luck apparently had played out yesterday, or early this morning.

The miners had surely named Hang Tree well, since there was nearly always someone dangling from the oak tree at the edge of town.

Hang Tree was little more than a bunch of huts, tents, and cabins that had grown up along the rutted road that wound down out of the mountains and eventually ended up at Sutter's Fort in the town of Sacramento—but that was a far piece away. There was a racket of piano and fiddle music coming from the saloons, mingling with a caterwauling that could loosely be called singing, but really sounded more like a cat with its tail caught in a cellar trapdoor. The newest of three saloons was just a big tent on which



someone had painted The Golden Jewel in black letters. The other two, having been in town since at least last year, were log cabins with real signs at the peak of their roofs. One was called The Best Bet and the other was Ben's Gold Bar.

Added to the saloons, and back aways against the side of the hill, were the crib houses, where four or five girls plied an ancient trade as well as proved that the womanless days of 1849 were gone forever. Other buildings hunched along the dusty road included an assay office–stage depot combination, a warehouse, a general store, a doctor's office, and the sheriff's office, with what passed for a jail. The lockup was a big box made of poles that looked more like an elaborate bear trap. As I went by, I noticed that it sported a couple of drunks in the throes of getting sober again.

Now, being young and handsome, not to mention loaded with gold dust, I cast a longing gaze toward the crib houses and thought mightily of the fleshy pleasures offered there. It had been an awful long time since I had even sniffed the perfume that women wore—but I held back. My job was supplies for the camp on this trip, and besides, winter would soon be here and I'd have plenty of gold in my poke to dally some with the fair sex. So I tied Flower to the hitching post of the general store and went in.

The owner's wife, Mrs. Louden, was a plump, sweet-natured lady who looked like everybody's grandma. She knew every miner in the country. She was scowling off in the direction of the crib houses through a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles perched on her tiny nose. When I shut the door she smiled at me as pretty as a pleased mother and tucked a wisp of gray hair back into place in the bun at the back of her head. The boys and I had dealt here since we'd first come up from Sacramento.

"Why, lan' sakes," she cooed. "Harold Dunkenmyer. How've ye fared, lad?"

"Well enough, ma'am. How've you an' the mister been?"

"Fair to middlin'. What can I do fer you?"

I handed her the list that Thad and I had put together and she skimmed over it through the spectacles. "Land o' mercy, Harold. Wine? You boys took t'sippin' wine of an evening?"

"No, ma'am," I said, blushing. "It's for cooking."

"Cooking!"

"Yes, ma'am. So's th' garlic, onions, chili powder, sweet basil, dry mustard, an' all that. 'Course, the whiskey is fer the boys. An' the flour, salt, beans, an'. . . ."

"Cooking," she interrupted. "Lan' sakes, Harold. Where on earth did you learn to cook?"

"Back East. My ma taught me a lot when I was young. Then I spent a winter workin' at a St. Louis hotel, helpin' a chef, before I got joined with the wagon train t'come out here."

"Well, my stars. Now, I'll have to dig around fer a lot of these things, since we don't git much call fer them. Why don't you have a drink over at the saloon, while I gather up what you have listed."

"All right, ma'am," I said. "Oh, d'you have the eggs an' the sugar? An' the raisins?"

"Yes, an' the dried apples. Why?"

I blushed again. "I promised the boys a raisin cake."

"A cake!" Her mouth fell open.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

She didn't even talk. She just nodded and I went out and crossed over the dust clouded street to Ben's Gold Bar.

I spent the biggest part of an hour bending my elbow at the saloon and talking with a few of the miners I knew. Then I went back to the store, paid my tally, and loaded Flower's panniers for the trip back to Guzzler's Gulch. The whiskey made such a warm glow in my stomach that I sang and whistled all the way back.

"You what?" The two words were a roar that boomed out of Red Eye's throat when I told them of my journey into Hang Tree during supper.

"Oh, my good God," Stub moaned.

"Skinny," Thad said into the dismal silence that fell over the table. "Have ya any idea what you've done?"

"Why, I just passed the time o' day with Missus Louden is all, an' had a couple o' drinks."

"To hell with the drinks," Red Eye growled. "Ya done went an' told Missus Louden about yer cookin'."

"So?" I asked with a shrug.

"So! That all ya kin say? So?" Red Eye's face was as red as the white of his eye. "Why, that ole

buzzard has a tongue that ain't stopped waggin' since she cut her milk teeth!"

"Oh, Lord," Stub wailed. "I bet by now it's all over th' mines thet we got us a first-class cook here at Guzzler's Gulch."

"Aw, fellas. Now look here. . . ."

"Don't you *aw fellas* us, Harold Dunkenmyer," Thad cut in. "Because o' you blabbin', now we got a problem. Every damn minin' camp in California will be after you."

"Well," I said flatly, "I won't go."

"Won't go?" Red Eye slapped the table so hard that the tin dishes jumped. "Won't go, won't ye? Why, hell's bells, man, d'you think they'll ask ye? Yer talkin' o' men that have been eatin' sow belly an' beans fer years."

"A man has rights," I persisted.

Red Eye pulled out his Navy Colt, stuck the end of the barrel against my forehead, and cocked it. The sound was loud and fast in the quiet of the cabin, but not so fast that I couldn't hear all four clicks as he yanked the hammer back. "Now, ya skinny little weasel," he growled. "You gonna do like I tell you?"

"Sure, Red. Take the gun away."

Red Eye took away the gun, set the hammer back down between the chambers, and shoved it back in the holster. "That," he said in a somewhat gentler voice, "is how they'll git ya to cook fer them. Works, don't it?"

"But they're all friends," I said. "We drank together. Hell, we froze together. . . ."

"Harold," Thaddeus said gently. "You're new to the mines, so I'll explain it to you. There's three things up here thet call an end to a friendship. Gold, women, an' a damned good cook, an' not necessarily in thet order."

"Son," Stub said, "I dunno how ya learned to cook an' I don't care. But I been towin' a pack mule around these here hills since forty-eight an' I never et better food in my life as the stuff you put together at thet fireplace. Now, I'm here ta tell you that I'd shoot my own father if he so much as mussed up yer hair."

"I dunno what to say," I mumbled.

"Wal, I do," Red Eye growled. "Ya gotta stay in this here cabin an' we gotta keep a eye on you. Them scruffy miners'll just be swarmin' all over the gulch ta git their hands on you."

I didn't say anything, but I thought a lot.

The next few days were busy as I pursued my chores around the cabin and the boys were never late in getting back from a day of mining the river. It gave me a kind of good feeling to see them gobbling down roasts, chops, and steamed trout, along with golden sourdough biscuits drenched in honey and gallons of black coffee sweetened with sugar. When I placed a dried apple pie on the table for dessert one evening I thought I saw a tear form in Red Eye's good right eye.

It's just astonishing how a simple thing like cooking can transform the toughest galoot into a misty-eyed kid as he shovels a plateful of tender vittles into the furry opening in his face and chews gratefully. His eyes will take on a faraway stare, as though he's peering at the gates of heaven, and he won't even utter a word as he satisfies the hunger of his inner self.

Over time it dawned on me that I had become more than a partner. I was a cherished possession of the trio of miners at Guzzler's Gulch. At first all of this baffled me and finally, it began to worry me. I wasn't sure I liked being owned, and the boys took the whole thing as serious as a face-to-face meeting with a raging cougar.

Each morning the other miners would ask me what I had planned for supper. When I told them their eyes would get sort of dreamy.

"Where ya goin'?" Red Eye asked after supper one evening.

"I need a bucket of water."

"I'll git it." He took the bucket out of my hand and tromped off to the river.

Another time I'd head for the door and one of them would ask me the same question.

"I'm goin' to the outhouse," I'd say.

"Reckon I gotta go, too," Thad would say and follow me.

After a while the whole thing gave me a terrible feeling. The only time I was alone was when I was cooking. Every evening they'd divide up the gold they'd dug or panned and add my share to a leather sack that was beginning to get real heavy. Each morning after breakfast, they'd ask me what I had planned for supper.

I'd just come out of the outhouse when something whacked me in the back of the head and stars began to dance in my brain.

When I told them their eyes would get sort of dreamy.

"Now, stick near the cabin, hear?" Red Eye would say.

"An' watch fer rattlers," Thad would add.

"Yeh. You'd best carry yer pistol, Skinny."

"God," I said finally, with some sarcasm. "Ya sure ya don't want to kiss me good-bye?"

None of them even grinned and Red Eye said seriously, "Why, no, I don't reckon so, Skinny." And they all tromped off down to the river toting their picks, pans, and shovels.

I was cleaning up, after having set a pan of cinnamon buns to baking at the fire, when I heard a sound outside the cabin. When I looked out the open door I saw this young man walking down the trail and leaning on a walking stick made from a piece of driftwood. He was a blond-haired boy who looked tuckered out and his clothes were pretty well torn up.

When he saw me, he smiled weakly. "Oh, sir," he said. "Could you spare a plate o' beans an' point out the trail to Hang Tree?"

"Why, what on earth happened to you, pard?" I asked.

"Grizzly," he told me. "A big one. Come inta our camp an' kilt both my partners. I barely got away. I lost my gun. I lost the path down to the road leadin' to town, as well. God, mister, I been wanderin' these woods fer days."

"C'mon in, friend. I ain't one to turn out a fellow miner down on his luck."

That young man ate like he'd never tasted food before in his life. He was just a towheaded kid no more'n sixteen. Didn't hardly have the baby fat off him yet. So I fed him biscuits and honey, together with stew, and finally topped the meal off with the last piece of apple pie we had. Then I packed him an ample lunch and told him the trail to Hang Tree.

"Sir," he said, wiping his mouth on a torn shirtsleeve, "you're purely a angel. Ya truly saved my life."

It did my heart good to help out the poor kid with a plate or so of my cooking. In fact, I was as happy as a barn mouse in a mash barrel. He thanked me profusely and hobbled off down the trail toward Hang Tree. I set to work cooking supper for my three hungry miners who would soon be clomping up from the river bottom.

"You eat thet last piece o' pie, Skinny?" Doyle asked when he came in.

"No," I said and explained what had happened. While I talked, their mouths fell open and their eyes grew wide.

"A blue-eyed kid," Thad asked, "with honey-colored hair?"

"Looked mebbe fifteen?" Red Eye asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Oh, my Jesus," Stub Doyle groaned. "Ya just got suckered by the biggest play actor in the West. Them cheatin' damn varmints sent to San Francisco an' hired Sweet Face Calhoun to make this here play. I'll bet on it."

"Sweet Face Calhoun?" I asked.

"Aw, we called him that, but it ain't his real name. His real name is Elmer Fralick, but he acts under the name o' Lance Calhoun. He come west with me in forty-nine. Couldn't pan gold worth a damn, so he got a job actin' in San Francisco 'cause he looks about fifteen. Hell, he's thirty if he's a day."

"Well, how was I to know?"

"Now the cat's outta the bag, boys," Red Eye said, "an' we gotta figure out how to protect our cook."

"We could lock him in the cabin while we work," Thad suggested.

"Or mebbe chain him to something so they can't steal him," Doyle said.

"Now, just a damn minute, fellas," I protested. "I ain't no dog, nor no mule."

"Hell, no," Red Eye said. "You're worth a sight more'n a dozen mules."

"Mebbe," Thad suggested, "we could lay bear traps all around the camp."

"I ain't fond o' that idea," Red Eye said. "Skinny here would probably step in one huntin' up greens. Still, we gotta think of something. An' soon."

What got me into trouble was that I'd fallen into a rut in my chores. Every morning, about when the stars were starting to pale, I'd have to get up and start breakfast. The usual procedure was to put on my clothes while the boys slept, make a morning trip to the outhouse, then go down and wash up at the river. When I got back I'd set the coffee on and begin cooking breakfast. The coffee brewing worked like an alarm clock for the miners, and by the

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time daylight filled the gulch, the boys would be fed and off to dig gold.

This morning I'd just come out of the outhouse when something whacked me in the back of the head and all the paling stars decided to leave the sky to dance in my brain. When I came around I was in a strange cabin and I spent a full five minutes trying to get my eyes uncrossed in a head that felt as if a mule had kicked it.

"How you feelin', son?"

After my eyes got focused, I found myself staring into the gray eyes of Hemp Holliday and two of his miners. The skinny one, Reach Logan, stood about six feet four with a pockmarked face and a sheet of brown hair hanging in his eyes. His cohort was Flat Nose Dawson, who'd had his beak busted so many times he would have needed tacks to wear spectacles. He also had to breathe through his mouth and he talked funny.

Hemp was sixty if he was a day and as gray as a desert lizard. Now his bushy face was staring at me and his gray eyes looked concerned. "The boys dint hit ya too hard, did they, Mr. Dunkenmyer?"

"What'd they use," I asked, "a crowbar?"

Hemp scowled at his companions. "Dang it, I told you boys to use something gentle."

"We did, Hemp," Flat Nose said firmly. "It was a stick o' pinewood."

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"There, ya see," Hemp said, grinning. "Soft wood. We ain't aimin' to hurt ya none."

"How come ya hit me a'tall?"

"We need a cook."

"I'm already cookin' fer Guzzler's Gulch."

"Not now, ya ain't. Yer gonna cook fer us. We even laid in a good supply o' fixin's fer ye."

"Ya just can't steal a cook."

About that time a rifle cracked and a bullet tore through the chinking between the logs of the cabin. It punched a hole through a dishpan hanging on the far wall. I flattened out on the dirt floor.

"Skinny—you in there?"

"Yeah," I yelled.

"Well, stay low, 'cause we're gonna shoot the bejasus outa that cabin."

"You'll play hell doin' that, Red Eye Johnson," Hemp hollered. "This here's a stout cabin!"

A volley of rifle bullets punctuated the air and zipped around the room, having found the mud chinking of the log walls.

"We don't care how stout it is, Hemp! We'll burn it down!"

"Ya won't git close enough fer that, Red Eye!"

"Yeah? Well, watch this!"

Something thunked into the dry bark shingles on the roof. Then another thudded into it. It sounded like the boys were throwing rocks at the roof. Tendrils of smoke began to filter through the cracks in the ceiling. They were using fire arrows, but I didn't even know they could use a bow.

Hemp's old face showed serious concern as he looked at the smoke. "By God, boys," he said, "them's fire arrows!"

"They don't know how ta shoot arrers," Flat Nose said.

"No, but thet damned Pawnee Joe does!"

"Huh?"

"Sure. They likely got thet redskin ta shoot arrers by offerin' him a barrel o' whiskey."

"We should've thought o' that, Hemp."

"Yeh, but it's too late now. Red Eye! Yer gonna cook yer cook! Y'know thet, don't ye?"

"Well, you ain't gonna git him!"

I looked up at the flames that were beginning to eat through the roof. The room was getting smoky. "Now, looky here, Red Eye," I yelled. "I don't give a hoot what ya do ta these damned kidnappers, but I ain't anxious ta fry along with 'em!"

"It's a matter o' principle, Skinny! Nothin' personal, ya understand! We just can't abide a thief! Why, a thing like that could ruin the code of the mines!"

"So I gotta git cooked because o' the code of the damned mines?"

"Why, no, Skinny! Just walk out the door! There ain't nobody low enough ta shoot a cook!"

"He's right, son," Hemp admitted with some sorrow. "To shoot you would be worse than shootin' our own ma. I reckon we'll have to give up on this-here venture; but by the Lord, me an' the boys'll think o' something."

So the battle of Hemp Holliday's cabin ended in the defeat of the kidnapping varmints and I learned a valuable lesson. I got my gold sack and left the gold country. It took a heap of sneaking to get away from Guzzler's Gulch, since my fame as a cook had spread. Even to San Francisco, where I began a shipping business with my gold.

Just the other day a young man from the newspaper heard that I had been in the mines along the Stanislaus River and came to ask me about the cook who had disappeared without a trace. There was nothing I wanted to tell him about that person, so he satisfied himself with a story on my newly launched shipping company. He seemed impressed with the new sign I had just mounted on the building:

Golden Nugget Shipping Co.
John Smith, Proprietor

by JANE CANDIA COLEMAN

Runs with the Wind

I know it's September when the Indians come to gather acorns. It's women who come mostly, and young girls. I see them down there in the oak trees with their baskets, and they laugh and talk—woman talk, I'd guess, away from their men.

Gathering acorns is something they've been doing since before my people came, and we always left them alone to do it. We never had any trouble with the Apaches, even during the wars. Matter of fact, we always gave them a few beeves, figuring they were hungry. "Injuns or white, starvation's no fun," my dad always said, and he'd let them camp and cook down by the wash in those same oak trees. There were a few years back then when they didn't come; during the hard fighting when they were hiding out or on the reservation. And it always seemed to me as if those years had something missing, as if the season couldn't be without those bright skirts moving in the oaks and the sound of women laughing.

I was just turned nineteen, and I was helping my dad and breaking horses for a few of the big outfits in the valley. And what spare time I had, I was back in the Peloncillos chasing a pair of the prettiest steel-blue mules a man ever

I was sitting on the rocks when I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I eased around and saw an Indian girl by the water.

saw. They ran wild in a herd of mustangs, and they were eye-catchers—big, solid, and blue, like the underparts of a jay's wing. I'd set my heart on those mules, and tried catching them with every trick I knew, but they were still running free that fall before Geronimo surrendered.

After the crops were in, I took a week and went to make another try. I didn't have any fear of Apaches like most folks did then, though Ma said someday I'd meet one off somewhere and that would be the end of me.

I met one in the mountains all right, but it wasn't what anyone had expected I'd find, least of all me.

I'd run those mules and that herd pretty constantly for three, four days, and then I staked out a water hole they liked. It was at the mouth of a little canyon that narrowed as it ran back into the mountain. I'd made a brush corral at the narrowest spot, with a hidden gate I could swing tight shut. I figured I could jump them at the spring and drive them on back into that pen where I'd have plenty of time to sort out the mules and any mustangs that showed promise.

So I was there camped out in the rocks, my horse hobbled in the junipers—the big roan I had that could outrun anything—and I'd been sitting there just watching, listening, thinking that was near the prettiest spot on earth with the cottonwoods changing color and the water running clear, when I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. Bright-colored it was, so I knew it wasn't a deer, and I eased around and saw an Indian girl by the water.

She was checking around the way an animal does before it drinks, before it bends down and leaves itself open for attack. Then she knelt and drank, putting her mouth to the water and sucking.

I circled around and came down by her, quiet as a leaf. She never knew I was there till I spoke.

Now, I never could learn Apache. It just isn't in me. But I learned Spanish before I learned English, and studied it the time I went to school, and those Apaches, most of them, could speak that language.

"Buenos días," I said, soft as I could, and she jumped up like a doe and then froze.

Well, the fact was she wasn't an Indian, though she was dressed like one and had two tattoos on her cheeks like they do. But she had gray eyes—the clearest, lightest gray I ever saw, with black pupils and black around the edges like a rain cloud. And her hair wasn't black. It was reddish, and curly, too, though she'd pulled it back off her face.

Back then everybody had a story or two about white women captured by Indians. Some were used as slaves. Others married into the tribe and forgot their white families. Some had even been bought back and sent home. Some of those went eagerly, but there were always a few who pined away and died, missing their Indian families.

This girl wasn't a slave. Her clothes were good, though they were mended in places, and she didn't carry herself like someone used to beatings and hard use. In fact, the way she looked at me was plumb arrogant.

I figured she had a knife somewhere and would use it if I gave her the chance. But she was white, and that put me in a quandary. I couldn't walk away and leave a white woman out there. I had to at least try to bring her out.

Besides, the look in her eyes was so wild and pitiful, both at once, that I was curious. I've seen wild animals caught in traps that never give up, and I've always respected that courage, that need for freedom. Sometimes I've even opened a trap and let the critter go if it wasn't too bad hurt, and then gone home and said the trap was empty.

So we stood there, me wondering how to keep her, and she planning to fight or run the moment she got the chance.

"You be easy," I said to her, dropping my voice down deep like I was talking to a green colt.

I didn't know how much she understood, but again, I figured it was the sound that mattered, not the words. "You be easy. I'm not going to hurt you."

Those gray eyes flickered at me just a shade, and from that I figured she at least got the gist of what I was saying.

"My name's Rule," I said. "I live over yonder, and I'm out here chasing some wild mules." I went on talking, spinning out my words so she wouldn't spook.

"You're white," I said finally.

I'd never been with a woman, but I'd seen and heard enough so I knew what I wanted from her. She knew it, too.

"You're no Apache. Do you have a name?"

She didn't answer. Just drew back into herself.

So I went on. Seems like I never talked so much before or since, but I couldn't help myself. She was such a pretty little thing; slender, like a doe.

I explained about those mules, and how I'd been chasing them for years, and how slick they were in their blue hides. I said how I planned to train them to ride and pull a buggy, too, all the while taking a chance because Apaches liked mule meat better than beef, or so folks said. I hoped she wouldn't come back with a couple of braves and do what I couldn't.

When I ran out of talk I started on the Bible. That startled her. She shook her head and frowned like she almost understood or remembered some of it. I was in Jeremiah, just going along, when I noticed she was swaying a bit with the rhythm. I wouldn't have noticed except I was watching her so close, looking at those eyes like spring water with the sun on it.

"What's your name?" I asked suddenly. *"Como se llama?"*

And she said, "Runs-with-the-Wind," and then snapped her mouth tight shut and glared at me as if I'd tricked her.

Well, I had and I was mighty pleased with myself. That was my mistake.

She could run. No one ever had a better name. Straight as an arrow and as fast, and without a sound, she took off up the canyon. I went after her yelling, "Wait!" and then decided to save my breath. She went right up the side like a bird. I swear, she didn't seem to touch the ground, and me pounding along in back of her like a big-footed bull.

I'd never have caught her if she hadn't fallen. Her foot went out from under her and she went down and lay there, looking at me with that same mixture of hate and courage.

I'd never been with a woman, but I'd seen and heard enough so I knew what I wanted from her. She knew it, too. I saw it in her eyes and in the way her throat moved up and down like she couldn't swallow. She smelled sweet, like dry grass and the herbs my ma hung from the kitchen rafters. And her face was soft. I can still remember how it felt, smooth to the touch, with small bones underneath.

Maybe it was those little bones that did me in. Or maybe it was those eyes of hers, gone hopeless. Anyway, I couldn't do it.

I sat back. "Be easy," I told her. "Let me see your foot."

There wasn't but a bruise spreading out around her ankle. I held it in my hands a minute, thinking I was a fool not to take what was right there. But in the end I put her up behind me on the

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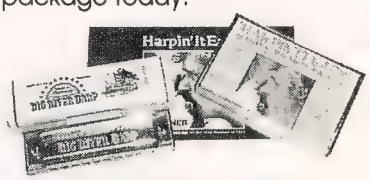

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roan and we went a little ways south, toward the mountains and her people. They were her people by then. Home is where you're used to. Where you're loved. And someone loved her. I'm sure of that.

She wouldn't let me take her all the way but jumped off by a big old juniper and looked up at me with her eyes so bright I was nearly blinded. She took my hand a minute and held it to her face, to those bones I could've snapped in my fingers. Then she smiled and ran off—fast—just like her name.

The yellow grass in that valley just swallowed her up. I watched a long time and never could see the direction she took, except I knew it was toward those mountains between us and Mexico; those mountains that were standing up purple against the sky and burning their picture into my mind.

Now, the funny thing is that I hung around camp a day or two, hoping maybe she'd come back or that the herd would come in to water. I tried to stay on the alert, but a man has to sleep sometimes, and the last night, just before first light, I dozed off.

I don't know what woke me. Maybe it was my roan snorting back in the trees, or maybe the jays squawking and giving their alarm. Better than watchdogs, jays are, if you know to listen for them.

Anyhow, I took my shotgun and eased down into the draw. A man can't be too careful if he's alone, even now, and the Indian wars over for half a century. So I went out slow, hardly breathing for fear I'd miss whatever was out there.

Up ahead I heard a commotion—hooves pounding and horses snorting mad. The gate I'd built across the canyon was shut tight, and in the pen were the mustangs and those two mules, their coats just as slick as if they'd been doused in Ma's washtub.

I hunted around looking for tracks, but never found a one. Those Apaches never left sign, but I knew it was them who'd brought in that herd, with maybe a little help from that gal. She was grateful, and she showed it best as she knew how.

Well, I took those mules home and trained them, and they did me proud, working cattle, pulling wagons and even a buggy when I finally went courting.

I never told anybody the whole story, though, figuring it was nobody's business and she was safe and where she wanted to be. Fifty years ago that happened. But every fall when those women come with their bright skirts and their baskets I look out and wonder if she's there. Runs-with-the-Wind, who I let go.

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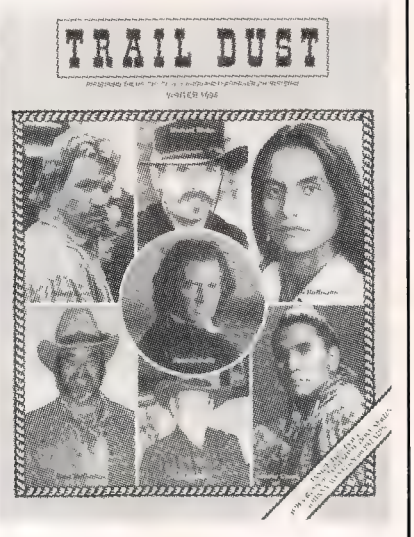

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LA

Across the aisle and five seats ahead of where Quincannon and Sabina were sitting, Evan Gaunt sat looking out through the day coach's dusty window. There was little enough to see outside the fast-moving Desert Limited except sun-blasted wasteland, but Gaunt seemed to find the emptiness absorbing. He also seemed perfectly comfortable, his expression one of tolerable boredom: a prosperous businessman, for all outward appearances, without a care or worry, much less a past history that included grand larceny, murder, and fugitive warrants in three western states.

THE Desert Limited

by BILL PRONZINI

"Hell and damn," Quincannon muttered. "He's been lounging there nice as you please for nearly forty minutes. What the devil is he planning?"

Sabina said, "He may not be planning anything, John."

"Faugh. He's trapped on this iron horse and he knows it."

"He does if he recognized you, too. You're positive he did?"

"I am, and no mistake. He caught me by surprise while I was talking to the conductor; I couldn't turn away in time."

"Still, you said it was eight years ago that you had your only run-in with him. And at that, you saw each other for less than two hours."

"He's changed little enough and so have I. A hard case like Gaunt never forgets a lawman's face, any more than I do a felon's. It's one of the reasons he's managed to evade capture as long as he has."

"Well, what *can* he be planning?" Sabina said. She was leaning close, her mouth only a few inches from Quincannon's ear, so their voices wouldn't carry to nearby passengers. Ordinarily the nearness of her fine body and the warmth of her breath on his skin would have been a powerful distraction; such intimacy was all too seldom permitted. But the combination of desert heat, the noisy coach, and Evan Gaunt made him only peripherally aware of her charms. "There are no stops between Needles and Barstow; Gaunt must know that. And if he tries to jump for it while we're traveling at this speed, his chances of survival are slim to none. The only sensible thing he can do is to wait until we slow for Barstow and then jump and run."

"Is it? He can't hope to escape that way. Barstow is too small and the surroundings too open. He saw me talking to Mr. Bridges; it's likely he also saw the Needles station agent running for his office. If so, it's plain to him that a

"I wouldn't put anything past Evan Gaunt," Quincannon said. "He might take a hostage, if he believed it was his only hope."

wire has been sent to Barstow and the sheriff and a complement of deputies will be waiting. I was afraid he'd hopped back off then and there, those few minutes I lost track of him shortly afterward, but it would've been a foolish move and he isn't the sort to panic. Even if he'd gotten clear of the train and the Needles yards, there are too many soldiers and Indian trackers at Fort Mojave."

"I don't see that Barstow is a much better choice for him. Unless. . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Is he the kind to take a hostage?"

Quincannon shifted position on his seat. Even though this was October, usually one of the cooler months in the Mojave Desert, it was near-stifling in the coach; sweat oiled his skin, trickled through the brush of his freebooter's beard. It was crowded, too, with nearly every seat occupied in this car and the other coaches. He noted again, as he had earlier, that at least a third of the passengers here were women and children.

He said slowly, "I wouldn't put anything past Evan Gaunt. He might take a hostage, if he believed it was his only hope of freedom. But it's more likely that he'll try some sort of trick first. Tricks are the man's stock-in-trade."

"Does Mr. Bridges know how potentially dangerous he is?"

"There wasn't time to discuss Gaunt or his past in detail. If I'd had my way, the train would've been held in Needles and Gaunt arrested there. Bridges might've agreed to that if the Needles sheriff hadn't been away in Yuma and only a part-time deputy left in charge. When the station agent told him the deputy is an unreliable drunkard, and that it would take more than an hour to summon soldiers from the fort, Bridges balked. He's more concerned about railroad timetables than he is about the capture of a fugitive."

Sabina said, "Here he comes again. Mr. Bridges. From the look of him, I'd say he's very much concerned about Gaunt."

"It's his own blasted fault."

The conductor was a spare, sallow-faced man in his forties who wore his uniform and cap as if they were badges of honor. The brass buttons shone, as did the heavy gold watch chain and its polished elk's-tooth fob; his tie was tightly knotted and his vest buttoned in spite of the heat. He glanced nervously at Evan Gaunt as he passed, and then mournfully and a little accusingly at Quincannon, as if he and not Gaunt was to blame for this dilemma. Bridges was not a man who dealt well with either a crisis or the disruption of his precise routine.

When he'd left the car again Sabina said, "You and I *could* arrest Gaunt ourselves, John. Catch him by surprise, get the drop on him . . ."

"He won't be caught by surprise—not now that he knows we're onto him. You can be sure he has a weapon close to hand and won't hesitate to use it. Bracing him in these surroundings would be risking harm to an innocent bystander."

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

"Nothing, for the present, except to keep a sharp eye on him. And be ready to act when he does."

Quincannon dried his forehead and beard with his handkerchief, wishing this was one of Southern Pacific's luxury trains—the Golden State Limited, for instance, on the San Francisco–Chicago run. The Golden State was ventilated by a new process that renewed the air inside several times every hour, instead of having it circulated only slightly and cooled not at all by sluggish fans. It was also brightly lighted by electricity generated from the axles of moving cars, instead of murkily lit by oil lamps; and its seats and berths were more comfortable, its food better by half than the fare served on this southwestern desert run.

He said rhetorically, "Where did Gaunt disappear to after he spied me with Bridges? He gave me the slip on purpose, I'm sure of it. Whatever he's scheming, that's part of the game."

"It was no more than fifteen minutes before he showed up here and took his seat."

"Fifteen minutes is plenty of time for mischief. He has more gall than a roomful of senators." Quincannon consulted his turnip watch; it was nearly two o'clock. "Four, is it, that we're due in Barstow?"

"Four oh five."

"More than two hours. Damnation!"

"Try not to fret, John. Remember your blood pressure."

Another ten minutes crept away. Sabina sat quietly, repairing one of the grosgrain ribbons that had come undone on her traveling hat. Quincannon fidgeted, not remembering his blood pressure, barely noticing the way light caught Sabina's dark auburn hair and made it shine like bur-

500 miles from nowhere, it'll give you a cold drink or a warm burger...

NASA space flights inspired this portable fridge that outperforms conventional fridges, replaces the ice chest and alternates as a food warmer.

By Charles Anton

Recognize the ice cooler in this picture? Surprisingly enough, there isn't one. What you see instead is a Koolatron, an invention that replaces the traditional ice cooler, and its many limitations, with a technology even more sophisticated than your home fridge. And far better suited to travel.

What's more, the innocent looking box before you is not only a refrigerator, it's also a food warmer.

NASA inspired portable refrigerator. Because of space travel's tough demands, scientists had to find something more dependable and less bulky than traditional refrigeration coils and compressors. Their research led them to discover a miraculous solid state component called the thermo-electric module.

Aside from a small fan, this electronic fridge has no moving parts to wear out or break down. It's not affected by tilting, jarring or vibration (situations that cause home fridges to fail). The governing module, no bigger than a matchbook, actually delivers the cooling power of a 10 pound block of ice.

From satellites to station wagons. Thermo-electric temperature control has now been proven with more than 25 years of use in some of the most rigorous space and laboratory applications. And Koolatron is the first manufacturer to make this technology available to families, fishermen, boaters, campers and hunters– in fact anyone on the move.

Home refrigeration has come a long way since the days of the ice box and the block of ice. But when we travel, we go back to the sloppy ice cooler with its soggy and sometimes spoiled food. No more! Now for the price of a good cooler and one or two seasons of buying ice, (or about five family restaurant meals), all the advantages of home cooling are available for you electronically and conveniently.

Think about your last trip. You just got away nicely on your long-awaited vacation. You're cruising comfortably in your car along a busy interstate with only a few rest stops or restaurants. You guessed it... the kids want to stop for a snack. But your Koolatron is stocked with fruit, sandwiches, cold drinks, fried chicken... fresh and cold. Everybody helps themselves and you have saved valuable vacation time and another expensive restaurant bill.

Hot or cold. With the switch of a plug, the Koolatron becomes a food warmer for a casserole, burger or baby's bottle. It can go up to 125 degrees.

And because there are no temperamental compressors or gasses, the Koolatron works perfectly under all circumstances, even upside down. Empty, the large model weighs only 12 pounds and the smaller one weighs just seven. Full, the large model holds up to 40 12-oz. cans and the smaller one holds six.

Just load it up and plug it in. On motor trips, plug your Koolatron into your cigarette lighter; it will use less power than a tail light. If you decide to carry it to a picnic place or a fishing hole, the Koolatron will hold its cooling capacity for 24 hours. If you leave it plugged into your battery with the engine off, it consumes only three amps of power.

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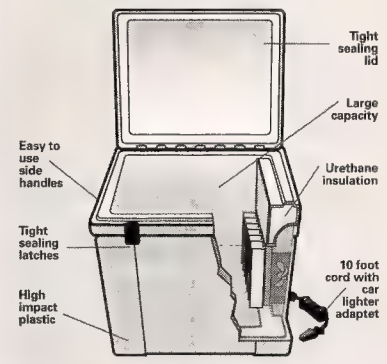
The secret of the Koolatron Cooler/Warmer is a miniature thermo-electric module that effectively replaces bulky piping coils, loud motors and compressors used in conventional refrigeration units. In the cool mode, the Koolatron reduces the outside temperature by 40 degrees F. At the switch of a plug, it becomes a food warmer, going up to 125 degrees.



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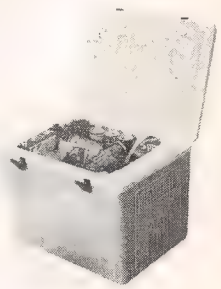

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nished copper. And still Evan Gaunt peered out at the unchanging panorama of sagebrush, greasewood, and barren, tawny hills.

No sweat or sign of worry on *his* face, Quincannon thought with rising irritation. A bland and unmemorable countenance it was, too, to the point where Gaunt would all but become invisible in a crowd of more noteworthy men. He was thirty-five, of average height, lean and wiry; and although he had grown a thin mustache and sideburns since their previous encounter, the facial hair did little to individualize him. His lightweight sack suit and derby hat were likewise undistinguished. A human chameleon, by God. That was another reason Gaunt had avoided the law for so long.

There was no telling what had brought him to Needles, a settlement on the Colorado River, or where he was headed from there. Evan Gaunt seldom remained in one place for any length of time—he was a predator constantly on the prowl for any illegal enterprise that required his particular brand of guile. Extortion, confidence swindles, counterfeiting, bank robbery—Gaunt had done them all and more, and served not a day in prison for his transgressions. The closest he'd come was that day eight years ago when Quincannon, still affiliated with the U.S Secret Service, had led a raid on the headquarters of a Los Angeles-based counterfeiting ring. Gaunt was one of the koniakers taken prisoner after a brief skirmish and personally questioned by Quincannon. Later, while being taken to jail by local authorities, Gaunt had wounded a deputy and made a daring escape in a stolen milk wagon—an act that had fixed the man firmly in Quincannon's memory.

Gaunt was a human chameleon. That was another reason he had avoided the law for so long.

When he'd spied Gaunt on the station platform in Needles, it had been a much-needed uplift to his spirits: he'd been feeling less than pleased with his current lot. He and Sabina had spent a week in Tombstone investigating a bogus mining operation, and the case hadn't turned out as well as they'd hoped. And after more than twenty-four hours on the Desert Limited, they were still two long days from San Francisco. Even in the company of a beautiful woman, train travel was monotonous—unless, of course, you were sequestered with her in the privacy of a drawing room. But there were no drawing rooms to be had on the Desert Limited, and even if there were, he couldn't have had Sabina in one. Not on a train, not in their Tombstone hotel, not in San Francisco—not anywhere, it seemed, past, present, or future. Unrequited desire was a maddening thing, especially when you were in such close proximity to the object of your desire. His passion for his partner was exceeded only by his passion for profitable detective work; Carpenter and Quincannon, Lovers, as an adjunct to Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, would have made him a truly happy man.

Even Gaunt had taken his mind off that subject by offering a prize almost as inviting. Not only were there fugitive warrants on Gaunt, but two rewards totaling five thousand dollars. See to it that he was taken into custody and the reward money would belong to Carpenter and Quincannon. Simple enough task, on the surface; most of the proper things had been done in Needles and it seemed that Gaunt was indeed trapped on this clattering, swaying iron horse. And yet the man's audacity, combined with those blasted fifteen minutes—

Quincannon tensed. Gaunt had turned away from the window, was getting slowly to his feet. He yawned, stretched, and then stepped into the aisle; in his right hand was the carpetbag he'd carried on board in Needles. Without hurry, and without so much as an eye flick in their direction, he sauntered past where Quincannon and Sabina were sitting and opened the rear door.

Close to Sabina's ear Quincannon murmured, "I'll shadow him. You wait here." He adjusted the Navy Colt he wore holstered under his coat before he slipped out into the aisle.

The next car back was the second-class Pullman. Gaunt went through it, through the first-class Pullman, through the dining car and the observation lounge, into the smoker. Quincannon paused outside the smoker door; through the glass he watched Gaunt sit down, produce a cigar from his coat pocket, and snip off the end with a pair of gold cutters. Settling in here, evidently, as he'd settled into the day coach. Damn the man's coolness! He entered as Gaunt was applying a lucifer's flame to the cigar end. Both pretended the other didn't exist.

In a seat halfway back Quincannon fiddled with pipe and shag-cut tobacco, listening to the steady, throbbing rhythm of steel on steel, while Gaunt smoked his cigar with obvious pleasure. The process took more than ten min-

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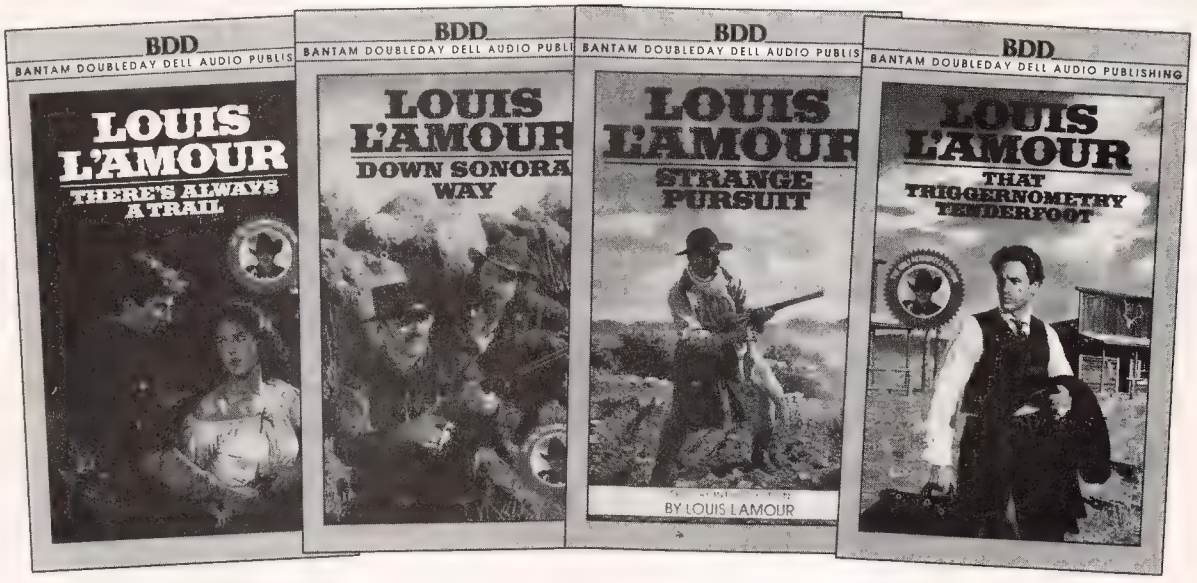

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utes, at the end of which time the fugitive got leisurely to his feet and started forward again. A return to his seat in the coach? No, not yet. Instead he entered the gentlemen's lavatory and closed himself inside.

Quincannon stayed where he was, waiting, his eye on the lavatory door. His pipe went out; he relighted it. Two more men—a rough-garbed miner and a gaudily outfitted drummer—came into the smoker. Couplings banged and the car lurched slightly as its wheels passed over a rough section of track. Outside the windows a lake shimmered into view on the southern desert flats, then abruptly vanished: heat mirage.

The door to the lavatory remained closed.

A prickly sensation that had nothing to do with the heat formed between Quincannon's shoulder blades. How long had Gaunt been in there? Close to ten minutes. He tamped the dottle from his pipe, stowed the briar in the pocket of his cheviot. The flashily dressed drummer left the car; a fat man with muttonchop whiskers like miniature tumbleweeds came in. The fat man paused, glancing around, then turned to the lavatory door and tried the latch. When he found it locked he rapped on the panel. There was no response.

The lone window in the lavatory was designed for ventilation, but not too small for a man Gaunt's size to wiggle through.

Quincannon was on his feet by then, with the prickly sensation as hot as a fire-rash. He prodded the fat man aside, ignoring the indignant oath this brought him, and laid an ear against the panel. All he could hear were train sounds: the pound of beating trucks on the fishplates, the creak and groan of axle play, and the whisper of the wheels. He banged on the panel with his fist, much harder than the fat man had. Once, twice, three times. This likewise produced no response.

"Hell and damn!" he growled aloud, startling the fat man, who turned quickly for the door and almost collided with another just stepping through. The newcomer, fortuitously enough, was Mr. Bridges.

When the conductor saw Quincannon's scowl, his back stiffened and alarm pinched his sallow features. "What is it?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

"Evan Gaunt went in here fifteen minutes ago and he hasn't come out."

"You don't think he—?"

"Use your master key and we'll soon find out."

Bridges unlocked the door. Quincannon pushed in first, his hand on the butt of his Navy Colt—and immediately blistered the air with a five-jointed oath.

The cubicle was empty.

"Gone, by all the saints!" Bridges said behind him. "The damned fool went through the window and jumped."

The lone window was small, designed for ventilation, but not too small for a man Gaunt's size to wiggle through. It was shut but not latched; Quincannon hoisted the sash, poked his head out. Hot, dust-laden wind made him pull it back in after a few seconds.

"Gone, yes," he said, "but I'll eat my hat if he jumped at the rate of speed we've been traveling."

"But—but he must have. The only other place he could've gone—"

"Up atop the car. That's where he did go."

Bridges didn't want to believe it. His thinking was plain: If Gaunt had jumped, he was rid of the threat to his and his passengers' security. He said, "A climb like that is just as dangerous as jumping."

"Not for a nimble and desperate man."

"He couldn't hide up there. Nor on top of any of the other cars. Do you think he crawled along the roofs and then climbed back down between cars?"

"It's the likeliest explanation."

"Why would he do such a thing? There's nowhere for him to hide *inside,* either. The only possible places are too easily searched. He must know that, if he's ridden a train before."

"We'll search them anyway," Quincannon said darkly. "Every nook and cranny from locomotive to caboose, if necessary. Evan Gaunt is still on the Desert Limited, Mr. Bridges, and we're damned well going to find him."

The first place they went was out onto the platform between the lounge car and the smoker, where Quincannon climbed the iron ladder attached to the smoker's rear wall. From its top he could look along the roofs of the cars, protecting his eyes with an upraised arm: the coal-flavored smoke that rolled back from the locomotive's stack was peppered with hot cinders. As expected, he saw no sign of Gaunt. Except, that was, for marks in the thin layers of grit that coated the tops of both lounge car and smoker.

"There's no doubt now that he climbed up," he said when he re-

joined Bridges. "The marks on the grit are fresh."

The conductor's answering nod was reluctant and pained.

Quincannon used his handkerchief on his sweating face. It came away stained from the dirt and coal smoke, and when he saw the streaks, his mouth stretched in a thin smile. "Another fact: No matter how long Gaunt was above or how far he crawled, he had to be filthy when he came down. Someone may have seen him. And he won't have wandered far in that condition. Either he's hiding where he lighted, or he took the time to wash up and change clothes for some reason."

"I still say it makes no sense. Not a lick of sense."

"It does to him. And it will to us when we find him."

They went to the rear of the train and began to work their way forward, Bridges alerting members of the crew and Quincannon asking questions of selected passengers. No one had seen Gaunt. By the time they reached the first-class Pullman, the urgency and frustration both men felt were taking a toll: preoccupied, Quincannon nearly bowled over a pudgy, bonneted matron outside the women's lavatory and Bridges snapped at a white-maned, senatorial gent who objected to having his drawing room searched. It took them ten minutes to comb the compartments there and the berths in the second-class Pullman: another exercise in futility.

In the first of the day coaches, Quincannon beckoned Sabina to join them and quickly explained what had happened. She took the news stoically; unlike him, she met any crisis with a shield of calm. She said only, "He may be full of tricks, but he can't make himself invisible. Hiding is one thing; getting off this train is another. We'll find him."

"He won't be in the other two coaches. That leaves the baggage car, the tender, and the locomotive; he has to be in one of them."

"Shall I go with you and Mr. Bridges?"

"I've another idea. Do you have your derringer with you or packed away in your grip?"

"In here." She patted her reticule.

"Backtrack on us, then; we may have somehow overlooked him. But don't take a moment's chance if he turns up."

"I won't," she said. "And I'll warn you the same."

The baggage master's office was empty. Beyond, the door to the baggage car stood open a few inches.

Scowling, Bridges stepped up to the door. "Dan?" he called. "You in there?"

No answer.

Quincannon drew his revolver, shouldered Bridges aside, and widened the opening. The oil lamps were lighted; most of the interior was visible. Boxes, crates, stacks of luggage, and express parcels—but no sign of human habitation.

"What do you see, Mr. Quincannon?"

"Nothing. No one."

"Oh, Lordy, I don't like this, none of this. Where's Dan? He's almost always here, and he never leaves the door open or unlocked when he isn't. Gaunt? Is he responsible for this? Oh, Lordy, I should've listened to you and held the train in Needles."

Quincannon shut his ears to the conductor's babbling. He eased his body through the doorway, into an immediate crouch behind a packing crate. Peering out, he saw no evidence of disturbance. Three large crates and a pair of trunks were belted in place along the near wall. Against the far wall stood a wheeled luggage cart piled with carpetbags, grips, and war bags. More luggage rested in neat rows nearby; he recognized one of

Quincannon drew his revolver, shouldered Bridges aside, and widened the opening to the baggage car.

the larger grips, pale blue and floral-patterned, as Sabina's. None of it appeared to have been moved except by the natural motion of the train.

Toward the front was a shadowed area into which he couldn't see clearly. He straightened, eased around and alongside the crate with his Navy at the ready. No sounds, no movement . . . until a brief lurch and shudder as the locomotive nosed into an uphill curve and the engineer used his air. Then something slid into view in the shadowy corner.

A leg. A man's leg, bent and twisted.

Quincannon muttered an oath and closed the gap by another half dozen paces. He could see the rest of the man's body then—a sixtyish gent in a trainman's uniform, lying crumpled, his cap off and a dark blotch staining his gray hair. Quincannon went to one knee beside him, found a thin wrist, and pressed it for a pulse. The beat was there, faint and irregular.

"Mr. Bridges! Be quick!"

The conductor came running inside. When he saw the unconscious crewman he jerked to a halt; a moaning sound vibrated in his throat. "My God, Old Dan! Is he—?"

"No. Wounded but still alive."

"Shot?"

"Struck with something heavy. A gun butt, like as not."

"Gaunt, damn his eyes."

"He was after something in here. Take a quick look around, Mr. Bridges. Tell me if you notice anything missing or out of place."

"What about Dan? One of the drawing-room passengers is a doctor."

"I noticed something earlier that I thought must be a coincidence," Sabina said. "Now I'm not so sure it is."

"Fetch him. But look here first."

Bridges took a quick turn through the car. "Nothing missing or misplaced, as far as I can tell. Dan's the only one who'll know for sure."

"Are you carrying weapons of any kind? Boxed rifles, handguns? Or dynamite or black powder?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

When Bridges had gone for the doctor Quincannon pillowed the baggage master's head on one of the smaller bags. He touched a ribbon of blood on the man's cheek, found it nearly dry. The assault hadn't taken place within the past hour, after Gaunt's disappearance from the lavatory. It had happened earlier, during his fifteen-minute absence outside Needles—the very first thing he'd done, evidently, after recognizing Quincannon.

That made the breaching of the baggage car a major part of his escape plan. But what could the purpose be, if nothing here was missing or disturbed?

The doctor was young, brusque, and efficient. Quincannon and Bridges left Old Dan in his care and hurried forward. Gaunt wasn't hiding in the tender; and neither the taciturn engineer nor the sweat-soaked fireman had been bothered by anyone or seen anyone since Needles.

That took care of the entire train, front to back. And where the bloody hell was Evan Gaunt?

Quincannon was beside himself as he led the way back down-train. As he and Bridges passed through the forward day coach, the locomotive's whistle sounded a series of short toots.

"Oh, Lordy," the conductor said. "That's the first signal for Barstow."

"How long before we slow for the yards?"

"Ten minutes."

"Hell and damn!"

They found Sabina waiting at the rear of the second coach. She shook her head as they approached: her backtracking had also proven fruitless.

The three of them held a huddled conference. Quincannon's latest piece of bad news put ridges in the smoothness of Sabina's forehead, her only outward reaction. "You're certain nothing was taken from the baggage car, Mr. Bridges?"

"Not absolutely, no. Every item in the car would have to be examined and then checked against the baggage manifest."

"If Gaunt did steal something," Quincannon said, "he was some careful not to call attention to the fact, in case the baggage master regained consciousness or was found before he could make good his escape."

"Which could mean," Sabina said, "that whatever it was would've been apparent to us at a cursory search."

"Either that, or where it was taken from would've been apparent."

Something seemed to be nibbling at her mind; her expression had turned speculative. "I wonder . . . "

"What do you wonder?"

The locomotive's whistle sounded again. There was a rocking and the loud thump of couplings as the engineer began the first slackening of their speed. Bridges said, "Five minutes to Barstow. If Gaunt is still on board—"

"He is."

"—do you think he'll try to get off here?"

"No doubt of it. Wherever he's hiding, he can't hope to avoid being found in a concentrated search. And he knows we'll mount one in Barstow, with the entire train crew and the authorities."

"What do you advise we do?"

"First, tell your porters not to allow anyone off at the station until you give the signal. And when passengers do disembark, they're to do so single file at one exit only. That will prevent Gaunt from slipping off in a crowd."

"The exit between this car and the next behind?"

"Good. Meet me there when you're done."

Bridges hurried away.

Quincannon asked Sabrina, "Will you wait with me or take another pass through the cars?"

"Neither," she said. "I noticed something earlier that I thought must be a coincidence. Now I'm not so sure it is."

"Explain that."

"There's no time now. You'll be the first to know if I'm right."

"Sabina . . . " But she had already turned her back and was purposefully heading forward.

He took himself out onto the platform between the coaches. The Limited had slowed to half

speed; once more its whistle cut shrilly through the hot desert stillness. He stood holding onto the handbar on the station side, leaning out to where he could look both ways along the cars—a precaution in the event Gaunt tried to jump and run in the yards. But he was thinking that this was another exercise in futility. Gaunt's scheme was surely too clever for such a predictable ending.

Bridges reappeared and stood watch on the offside as the Limited entered the railyards. On Quincannon's side the dun-colored buildings of Barstow swam into view ahead. Thirty years ago, at the close of the Civil War, the town—one of the last stops on the old Mormon Trail between Salt Lake City and San Bernardino—had been a teeming, brawling shipping point for supplies to and high-grade silver ore from the mines in Calico and other camps in the nearby hills. Now, with Calico a near-ghost town and most of the mines shut down, Barstow was a far tamer and less populated settlement. In its lawless days, Evan Gaunt could have found immediate aid and comfort for a price, and for another price, safe passage out of town and state; in the new Barstow he stood little enough chance—and none at all unless he was somehow able to get clear of the Desert Limited and into a hidey-hole.

A diversion of some sort? That was one possible gambit. Quincannon warned himself to remain alert for anything—anything at all—out of the ordinary.

Sabina was on his mind, too. Where the devil had she gone in such a hurry? What sort of coincidence—

Brake shoes squealed on the sun-heated rails as the Limited neared the station platform. Less than a score of men and women waited in the shade of a roof overhang; the knot of four solemn-faced gents standing apart at the near end was bound to be Sheriff Hoover and his deputies.

Quincannon swiveled his head again. Steam and smoke hazed the air, but he could see clearly enough: No one was making an effort to leave the train on this side. Nor on the offside, else Bridges would have cut loose with a shout.

The engineer slid the cars to a rattling stop alongside the platform. Quincannon jumped down with Bridges close behind him, as the four lawmen ran over through a cloud of steam to meet them. Sheriff Hoover was burly and sported a tobacco-stained mustache; on the lapel of his dusty frock coat was a five-pointed star, and in the holster at his belt was a heavy Colt Dragoon. His three deputies were also well-armed.

"Well, Mr. Bridges," the sheriff said. "Where's this man, Evan Gaunt? Point him out and we'll have him in irons before he can blink twice."

Bridges said dolefully, "We don't have any idea where he is."

"You don't— What's this? You mean to say he jumped somewhere along the line?"

"I don't know what to think. Mr. Quincannon believes he's still on board, hiding."

"Does he now." Hoover turned to Quincannon, gave him a quick appraisal. "So you're the flycop, eh? Well, sir? Explain."

Quincannon explained, tersely, with one eye on the sheriff and the other on the rolling stock. Through the grit-streaked windows he could see passengers lining up for departure; Sabina, he was relieved to note, was one of them. A porter stood between the second and third day coaches, waiting for the signal from Bridges to put down the steps.

"Damn strange," Hoover said at the end of Quincannon's recital. "You say you searched everywhere, every possible hiding place. If that's so, how could Gaunt still be on board?"

"I can't say yet. But he is—I'll stake my reputation on it."

"Well, then, we'll find him. Mr. Bridges, disembark your passengers. All of 'em, not just those for Barstow."

"Just as you say, Sheriff."

Bridges signaled the porter, who swung the steps down and permitted the exodus to begin. One of the first passengers to alight was Sabina. She came straight to where Quincannon stood, took hold of his arm, and drew him a few paces aside. Her manner was urgent, her eyes bright with triumph.

Sabina's actions so surprised Gaunt that he had no time to do anything but swipe at her with one arm, a blow that she dodged.

"John," she said, "I found him."

He had long ago ceased to be surprised at anything Sabina said or did; she was his equal as a detective in every way. He asked, "Where? How?"

She shook her head. "He'll be getting off any second."

"Getting off? How could he—?"

"There he is!"

Quincannon squinted at the passengers who were just then disembarking: two women, one of whom had a small boy in tow. "Where? I don't see him—"

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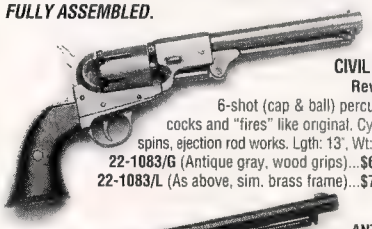

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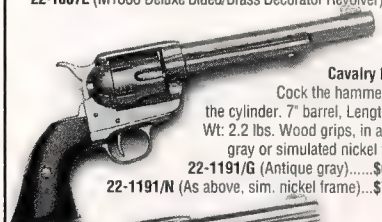

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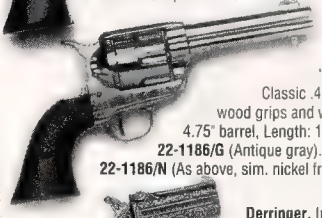

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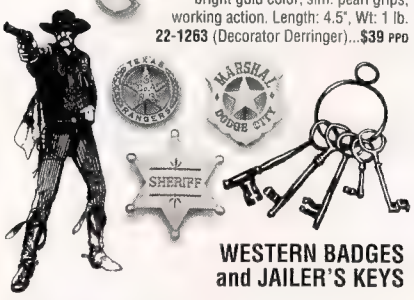

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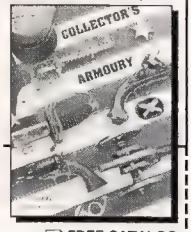

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Sabina was moving again. Quincannon trailed after her, his hand on the Navy Colt inside his coat. The two women and the child were making their way past Sheriff Hoover and his deputies, none of whom was paying any attention to them. The woman towing the little boy was young and pretty, with tightly curled blond hair; the other woman, older and pudgy, powdered and rouged, wore a gray serge traveling dress and a close-fitting Langtry bonnet that covered most of her head and shadowed her face. She was the one, Quincannon realized, that he'd nearly bowled over outside the women's lavatory in the first-class Pullman.

She was also Evan Gaunt.

He found that out five seconds later, when Sabina boldly walked up and tore the bonnet off, revealing the short-haired male head and clean-shaven face hidden beneath.

Hoover said in tones of utter amazement, "Well, I'll be damned." Which were Quincannon's sentiments exactly.

Her actions so surprised Gaunt that he had no time to do anything but swipe at her with one arm, a blow that she nimbly dodged.

Then he fumbled inside the reticule he carried and drew out a small-caliber pistol; at the same time, he commenced to run.

Sabina shouted, Quincannon shouted, someone else let out a thin scream; there was a small scrambling panic on the platform. But it lasted no more than a few seconds, and without a shot being fired. Gaunt was poorly schooled on the mechanics of running while garbed in women's clothing: the traveling dress's long skirt tripped him before he reached the station office. He went down in a tangle of arms, legs, petticoats, and assorted other garments that he had wadded up and tied around his torso to create the illusion of pudginess. He still clutched the pistol when Quincannon reached him, but one well-placed kick and it went flying. Quincannon then dropped down on Gaunt's chest with both knees, driving the wind out of him in a grunting hiss. Another well-placed blow, this one to the jaw with Quincannon's meaty fist, put an end to the skirmish.

Sheriff Hoover, his deputies, Mr. Bridges, and the Limited's passengers stood gawping down at the now half-disguised and unconscious fugitive. Hoover was the first to speak. He said in tones of utter amazement, "Well, I'll be damned."

Which were Quincannon's sentiments exactly.

"So that's why he assaulted Old Dan in the baggage car," Bridges said a short while later. Evan Gaunt had been carted off in steel bracelets to the Barstow jail, and Sabina, Quincannon, Hoover, and the conductor were grouped together in the station office for final words before the Desert Limited continued on its way. "He was after a change of women's clothing."

Sabina nodded. "He devised his plan as soon as he recognized John and realized his predica-

ment. A quick thinker, our Mr. Gaunt."

"The stolen clothing was hidden inside the carpetbag he carried into the lavatory?"

"It was. He climbed out the window and over the tops of the smoker and the lounge car to the first-class Pullman, waited until the women's lavatory was empty, climbed down through that window, locked the door, washed and shaved off his mustache and sideburns, dressed in the stolen clothing, put on rouge and powder that he'd also pilfered, and then disposed of his own clothes and carpetbag through the lavatory window."

"And when he came out to take a seat in the forward day coach," Quincannon said ruefully, "I nearly knocked him down. If only I had. It would've saved us all considerable difficulty."

Hoover said, "Don't chastise yourself, Mr. Quincannon. You had no way of suspecting Gaunt had disguised himself as a woman."

"That's not quite true," Sabina said. "Actually, John did have a way of knowing—the same way I discovered the masquerade, though at first notice I considered it a coincidence. Simple familiarity."

"Familiarity with what?" Quincannon asked.

"John, you're one of the best detectives I've known, but honestly, there are times when you're also one of the least observant. Tell me, what did I wear on the trip out to Arizona? What color and style of outfit? What type of hat?"

"I don't see what that has to do with—" Then, as the light dawned, he said in a smaller voice, "Oh."

"That's right," Sabina said, smiling. "Mr. Gaunt plundered the wrong woman's grip in the baggage car. The gray serge traveling dress and Langtry bonnet he was wearing are mine."

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A Matter of Principle

The Yankee captain sat straight and proud in his cavalry saddle. His uniform was immaculately clean. Sunlight bounced off his brass buttons in coruscated plumes. His handsome face was freshly shaven. He had swept the locks of his golden hair back at the temples, over the ears, ending in a stream of curls at the back of his head that barely touched his collar. A neatly waxed mustache, which he twirled between the fingers of his ungloved hand, accented his hawk-beaked nose and square jaw. His other hand, encased in regulation kidskin, held firmly to the reins of a broad-chested, dapple-gray stallion that danced and pranced in the late evening fog.

In striking contrast, the Rebel colonel sat wearily in the Texas saddle on his big roan mare. The horse, too tired to lift its head, ignored the speckled stud and munched gingerly on a clump of wet grass at its feet.

The tattered uniform of the Southern officer had not seen a washing in three weeks. Bunched up around his hulking frame, the heavy coat had lost its luster, much like the cause of battle in the past few days. These were the closing moments of the Civil War, although neither group of soldiers was aware of that in the Georgia swamp that evening.

Colonel Jonas Anderson, a Tennessee horse and mule trader, weighed the importance of what the young officer was saying.

"You have no choice, sir." The captain spoke matter-of-factly. "To not surrender would be... suicidal."

Anderson raised his head to look at the captain. The Southerner's eyes were puffy and bloodshot from lack of sleep. His beard, bright red when the war had started, was now a blend of gray and burnt umber, and was splattered with droplets of red clay from miles of hard riding through the wetlands. When

ILLUSTRATION BY KENT BARTON

by **O'Dell Garrett**

HOLY
BIBLE

he spoke, it was deliberately slow, forced over and through swollen vocal cords inflamed from a bout with the flu.

"I am," he said painfully, "a Confederate officer. I cannot surrender."

"But if you don't . . ." The captain was silenced by a wave of the colonel's broad, leathery hand.

"It is my responsibility, Captain, to lead these men to victory or to their deaths. Look at them. Tired, mostly wounded, some dying. It's been a stupid war, yet every man here is ready to fight before he surrenders. We are soldiers. We do our duty."

"But, Colonel . . . we have more than a hundred infantry, cavalry, and artillerymen. You have less than half that."

The colonel raised his head and glanced past the young captain. He stared not at the soldiers in blue, freshly rested and eager for battle. Rear-echelon types mostly, still humming the tunes their loved ones sang as they marched off to fight in a war that most of them were still too young to understand. Instead, Anderson looked at the graying sky above the ridge. Night was falling. How many of his men would fall in the oncoming battle? He would probably never see his wife or children again. He touched his breast pocket, where a half-finished letter rested against his heart. He had no time to add the final words, "I love you," to the page.

"What you say is true, Captain. But I cannot surrender. It's a matter of principle."

The captain looked at the row of Rebel soldiers resting beneath the trees on the other side of the clearing. Those who stood were bent with fatigue. Not a well-looking man in the lot. There would be no glory in this battle.

"Sir, I question your decision, but I do not question your bravery. I do not look forward to crossing my sword with yours."

"I am," Colonel Jonas Anderson said painfully, "a Confederate officer. I cannot surrender. We are soldiers. We do our duty."

"Neither do I, son. Neither do I."

The captain rose taller in his saddle and saluted, holding his hand firmly to the brim of his plumed hat. The senior officer summoned his best military dignity and returned the salute.

You're a fine officer, he thought. *You would have made a good Confederate.*

The captain snapped his hand down to his side and spurred his mount to the top of the hill, where his own commander waited for a report. Anderson held his position and watched the young officer approach the Northern commander. The senior Yankee officer hoisted himself higher in the saddle and looked across the wet expanse of early spring grass that separated the two armies.

"Then we choose to fight, sir?" the captain asked.

"If there were any way we could pass on this, I would welcome it." The Yankee colonel sighed.

"But we don't have that luxury, do we, sir? I mean . . . we're soldiers."

"Soldiers? Yes, we're soldiers, Captain. Prepare your men for battle."

The colonel signaled his captain of artillery to ready the cannons and looked to the infantry, which already was fixing bayonets.

From across the way, Colonel Anderson did not miss the order of battle. First, the Yankee artillery would open fire; then the cavalry would charge the line, scattering what was left of his men. The infantry would attack on the run before the ragtag Rebel soldiers could rally.

"Not today," Anderson swore. He yelled for his men to form a line. "Fix bayonets!"

His words carried across the clearing all the way to the enemy camp. The Yankee commander heard the raspy sound of Anderson's voice and turned to stare at the legion of half-dead enemy soldiers. He heard the disparaging sound rising from their throats, anguished moans melting into a singularly deafening roar. The eerie ferocity of their war cry chilled the young captain's spine as he dashed up beside his colonel for guidance.

There, in the misty solitude of a Georgia swamp, the remnants of a once-mighty army, morally unable to surrender, gathered itself into a cluster of grit and bravado under a leader who knew only one way to fight a battle.

"Charge!" Anderson yelled, and the long gray line of screaming, battle-seasoned soldiers surged with surprising speed at the startled enemy.

Too fast, they charged, for the artillery to vector its cannons. Too fast, they charged, for the cavalry to mount. Too fast, they charged into an infantry of mostly young boys who had never seen the front lines of battle.

The Yankee line fell back. Rebel soldiers fought with the conditioned reflexes of a hundred such skirmishes. Hours they fought. Into the night they fought. Into

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the darkness so black they could no longer distinguish a blue uniform from a gray one, still they fought. After a while they rested, but not for peaceful resuscitation, for the moans of their fallen comrades penetrated the night and grown men shook from fear, from shock, and from the cold dampness of the battleground.

Corpsmen crawled through muddy turf toward helpless, dying men, reaching out, blindly searching for wounds with their bare hands numbed by the cold, stuffing bandages into bloody orifices, doing what they could until morning. Then, with nothing else to do, one by one, the soldiers fell asleep. No sentries were posted, nobody stood watch, no command post provided refuge against the bitterness of battle. Only sleep gave meaning to the day's events.

When morning came, the Yankee colonel strained his eyes in the early morning fog, looking for his bugler. Reveille called the men to attention. Lines formed. Soldiers in gray stood next to soldiers in blue. Nobody raised a weapon. Nobody lifted a hand to fight.

The young captain, his uniform torn and badly soiled, searched out Colonel Anderson and found him slumped over the body of one of his men. The Rebel soldier's head was cradled in Anderson's arms and a Bible rested gently upon the man's chest.

"Colonel?" The captain stood above Anderson, his voice growing silent, finding no words that were appropriate to the scene of death before him.

Anderson lowered the soldier's head so it rested on a clump of marsh grass. He didn't attempt to rise. Reaching inside his pocket, Anderson's callused fingers withdrew a crumpled, half-finished letter to his wife. He handed it to the young captain, who took it and placed it next to his heart, inside his own tunic.

"You'll see that she gets the letter?" Anderson asked. "The address is on it."

"My honor, sir. I'll deliver it personally."

"You do that, son. I'm in your debt."

"And I am in yours, sir. You have taught me much about courage."

"Then have the courage to withdraw your sword. I do not wish to die with Yankee steel in my body."

The captain hesitated a moment, then stepped forward and gripped the saber. Sometime in the darkness, just before the final speckling of sunlight extinguished itself, the captain had made a riposte against an enemy soldier he could not see. He had not known it was Anderson who had fallen before him as the final thrust was made.

It took both hands to pull the saber free. Even then he had to brace one boot against the colonel's massive chest and pull with all his might. Finally, the flesh gave way and the steel blade withdrew. Anderson fell backward on his haunches with one arm bracing himself in a semi-upright position. The captain tossed down his sword and reached for Anderson, cradling him much the same way the colonel had held the dead private.

"I take no glory in this battle," the captain said.

"Glory is not what makes us men," Anderson replied. His voice was already growing weaker and his breathing sputtered profusely. "The causes we live and die for—our homes and families—that is what is important. You have your cause, Captain, I have mine."

"And honor, sir?"

"Honor lies somewhere between the two."

Anderson spoke no more. He closed his eyes and died with his right hand clasped around a simple gold wedding band that he wore on a leather thong around his neck. His body was placed alongside those of his men under the outflung branches of a Georgia pine. Disarmed, Rebel soldiers were permitted to wander on their own and parade past their fallen comrades. Each soldier saluted Anderson's body as he passed it.

During midday, while blue and gray alike ate from the same mess tent, a Yankee rider topped the ridge and sought out the command tent. He handed a scroll of paper to the Yankee colonel, who read the order silently and handed it to the captain of cavalry. The captain also read it in silence, ignoring the swell of tears that blurred his vision toward the end. He said nothing, then dropped the note in the mud and walked away. He walked to where Colonel Anderson's body rested and stood there solemnly in front of Anderson's men. He buttoned his tunic and smoothed back his long, golden hair, straightened himself to his fullest height, and gave to the men in gray the orders written in the note the messenger had delivered.

"You men can go home now. War's over. It ended three days ago."

"Who won, sir?" From bent knee, a long-necked Tennessee volunteer cocked his head to one side and squinted up at the captain.

"Nobody won. We all lost."

There, in the thickness of the Georgia swamp, soldiers on both sides lowered their heads in silent prayer as the Yankee captain saluted the Confederate officer who would not surrender.

LONE STAR

by JULIA HASTINGS

Corey braced the gun stock tight against her shoulder. Squinting into the sunrise, she sighted across the clearing where the crown of a battered gray hat had just flashed above a tumble of boulders.

Someone was watching the cabin.

Corey had no idea who he was, or what he wanted, or how long he had been there.

She did not know if he had seen her standing by the window in her white chemise as she hurriedly buttoned a plaid flannel shirt against the morning chill. Or if he watched her go out just as the sun brimmed over the tops of the pines to fill the bucket from the spring. Or heard her singing the chorus of "Green Grow the Lilacs" in a clear voice that, back in Kansas, had once made the Reverend Kester lower his hymnal to observe her with something more than pious approval.

Or if he knew she was alone.

"Probably doesn't," she muttered, straining her eyes for another glimpse. But there was nothing. No movement, no sounds, not even the squawk of a piñon jay. The very air seemed to have stilled, hovering, waiting.

The sky had been dark blue, dancing with stars, when she had awakened that morning. Cold seeped right through the bedclothes, and Corey had tugged the red and white quilt to her chin, missing her husband's warmth beside her. The thought of him home after two long weeks almost made her forget the jabbing anger she felt that he had left her behind again.

Tom had been gone so much that some of Prescott's citizens had whispered that the average Virginia reel

COREY HAD JUST TAKEN A SIP OF COFFEE WHEN SHE HAD SEEN THE FLASH OF MOVEMENT BEHIND THE ROCKS. HER HAND PAUSED MIDAIR.

lasted longer than the Sinclairs' honeymoon had. Corey wondered if she had let Tom down somehow; if she had been a disappointment to him.

She tried to picture his face and managed only a misty blur of wavy brown hair, gray eyes, winter-shagged beard. The beard masked his smile, she thought. Made him look older. Older and harder.

Granite Mountain was haloed gold when Corey finally wrapped the quilt around her, slid into her boots, and poked the fire alive. She pulled on her clothes, set coffee to boil, filled a chipped blue-willow cup, and, cradling the hot china in her hands, walked to the window, singing.

" 'Green grow the lilacs, all sparkling with dew. I'm lonesome, my love, from the parting with you . . .' " *This year I will plant a lilac bush,* she thought to herself. *Right by the porch steps. It's time I started to make this bachelor's cabin a home.*

She had just taken a sip of coffee, just noticed the way the early light played up the sharp green of unfurling oak leaves, when she had seen the flash of movement behind the rocks.

Her hand paused midair, the cup three inches from her lips. That gray blur could have been a deer, but Corey knew, as sure as she was aboveground and standing, that it was not.

Silently, she had set the cup on the table and listened for a sound, any sound, that did not belong. And she heard it—a quick, muffled scraping of boot heel on rock. Almost without thinking, she slid the bar across the door. Tom had taken the Winchester, so she lifted the heavy Spencer carbine from two wooden pegs over the lintel, slid in seven rimfire cartridges, and rested the barrel tip on the stone window ledge.

Narrowing her light blue eyes against the gold streaks of sun, she searched for what she hoped she had only imagined but feared she had not.

Who could be out there? she wondered. The cabin was twenty miles from Prescott, hidden in a remote, rocky-ledged valley at the base of Granite Mountain. Even the name of the place sounded harsh and lonely—Dogtooth Basin, for the jagged row of rocks that marked the only way in. Tom had picked rough, poor land for their ranch. Nobody just happened through at sunrise or any other time.

It was not an Apache, of that she was certain. Apaches had not threatened Prescott for years. Maybe the watcher was one of the Creels. Their ramshackle place five miles away at Iron Springs made them the nearest neighbors, and more often than not, Jimmy Creel managed to be mending fence right by the trail when Corey went riding on the roan mare. Just a kid, Jimmy would stare wide-eyed at her and cast shy, gap-toothed smiles when she waved.

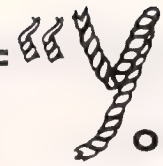
Then again, maybe it was Charlie Creel, and that would be another matter. Charlie was a banty rooster of a man whose temperament had not been improved when a Union saber notched the tip of his nose at Shiloh. Tom said Charlie was still fighting the war, even though it had been fifteen years since the last bugle blew. He was angry about that scar and looking for a dog to kick, preferably a Yankee, though any easily goaded greenhorn would do just fine. Corey had seen him send his own brother reeling across the boardwalk outside the Quartz Rock Saloon on Whiskey Row. She'd run over to help Jimmy up and Charlie's laugh had sent chills rippling down her spine.

She knew how he treated his brother. She did not want to think about how he'd treat a woman.

Repressing a shudder, Corey levered a cartridge into the chamber.

She was a good shot, but she was used to the lighter, more accurate Winchester. Besides, plunking at tin cans was not the same thing as shooting at an intruder who might be a whole lot better with a gun than she was.

She glanced down the basin, half hoping to spy the wagon winding up the draw. This was not the first time Tom had left her to run their struggling ranch, but these two weeks had followed hard on the heels of a bitterly cold winter. Tom rated winters by the cords of wood he burned. This one had been an eight-corder, as Corey well knew, for she had



OU OUT THERE," COREY CALLED THROUGH THE WINDOW. "WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WANT? I SEE YOU, YOU KNOW. COME OUT AND SHOW YOURSELF!"

chopped most of the oak and pine herself.

Now it was late April, snow still thick in shady spots, and she'd spoken to no one but Tom since October. Tom, when he did speak, talked mostly of cows.

Corey knew it was a weakness, but she had to admit that she was lonely. She had longed to go to Prescott, to see the fine brick courthouse with its white picket fence, to hear the sound of her boots on Gurley Street's board sidewalks, to stroll inside Gardner's Mercantile and smell roasting coffee and pickles and peppermints and orange-flower water. She had actually looked forward to standing at the counter saying, "Twenty pounds of sugar, please," and had dreamed about running her hands over a smooth stretch of blue calico sprigged with white, like puffs of fair-weather clouds on the wide Arizona sky.

"Better watch the stock," Tom had told her when she mentioned going. "No tellin' what that two-bit Creel outfit would get up to if they knew the place was deserted."

"There are at least eight men working for the Creels," she had said quietly, keeping her blue eyes on the place where the basin trail disappeared in the distance.

"I didn't say go fistfight 'em," he snapped. "Just keep things looking lived in. Move the herd around a little. You'll do fine. I married a strong woman."

Corey saw pride flash in his eyes.

"Prescott's mostly saloons, anyhow," he continued as he hitched the team. "Tell me what you need. I'll bring it."

What I need, Corey thought, *is to put on my one decent town dress and talk to a few people who understand that there's more to life than cows. Like that nice Ellie Newlin, Sheriff Newlin's wife, who had me to tea last summer.*

But what she had said was, "I don't think what I want can be loaded in a buckboard," and Tom had shrugged, climbed up onto the wagon seat, and giddapped the team. She had stood in the clearing in front of the cabin and watched him disappear through the boulders, damp oaks, and pines down into the browngrass valley.

For the first time in their year-long marriage, she felt anger pricking at her heart. Why was it Tom had all the adventure and took it for granted that she wanted to mind the ranch?

Corey wiped the perspiration from her palm and gripped the rifle tighter. Well, she thought, adventure had called her bluff. It had knocked on her front door, and she would soon learn what she was made of.

Suddenly, she decided she could not wait.

"You out there," she called through the window. "What is it that you want?"

She heard nothing but the wind whisking through the pine needles.

"I see you, you know," she went on. "Come out and show yourself like a man!"

Oh Lord, she thought, *and what will I do when he does?*

She had no time to consider the matter, because the man stood up, hands open and to his sides to show he was holding no weapon. He was not Jimmy Creel, or his bully of a brother, or anyone Corey knew. He was a stranger, lean and broad-shouldered, whose wide-brimmed sombrero shaded intense dark eyes.

"I'm looking for Tom Sinclair," he said in a low voice. "I mean no harm."

"There's no Tom Sinclair here." It was the truth, and she hoped the stranger might think himself mistaken and leave.

"This is the place, all right," he answered. "Sheriff Newlin wrote me Tom's was the only cabin in Dogtooth Basin. And unless the good sheriff is a liar, which I happen to know he is not, you're Corinna Sinclair."

Hearing a stranger say her name after so many months of hearing no voice but Tom's caught her off guard. "You know Sheriff Newlin?" she asked, trying to sound more sure of herself than she felt.

"Henry Newlin was my father's best friend."

Something in his voice made Corey go to the door, slide the bar, and open it.

EVEN A LOADED WAGON COULD DO THE TWENTY MILES TO PRESCOTT IN TWO DAYS, YET TOM WAS SELDOM AWAY LESS THAN A WEEK OR TWO.

She held the rifle waist-high, her rundown boots, faded brown skirt, and worn plaid shirt framed in the doorway. The morning sun warmed her tanned face and resolute blue eyes, lighting her amber hair with gold.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Name's Deck Hobbs. I knew your husband in Tucson."

She felt his eyes on her, sizing her up. She stood as tall as she could and returned his stare. His age was hard to tell. She knew only too well the effects of the fierce western sun and wind, and this Hobbs's face was weathered. Maybe thirty-two, she decided. He was clean-shaven and wore what once had been a nice suit coat of pin-striped wool over a collarless shirt and wool vest, a faded red silk bandanna, and wool pants covered with leather chaps. The toes of his leather boots were badly scuffed and scratched.

"Tom never mentioned any Deck Hobbs," she said. "I never heard the name."

"Heard it or not, it's who I am."

She stepped forward onto the porch. "And you came all the way from Tucson to Dogtooth Basin on a social call, is that it?"

The stranger grinned. "No, ma'am." He reached up and flipped his lapel. A silver star flashed in the sun. "I'm lookin' for someone."

"And you think Tom knows this . . . someone."

He nodded.

"Well, if you're a sheriff—"

"Just a deputy."

"—a deputy, then, why didn't you come to the door like an honest man would?"

"It was a little early to come callin'. Then I saw that rifle trained on my head and figured that unless Tom had changed his stripes, he'd shoot first and ask questions later. I had not figured on the defender bein' a lady."

"I suppose if you had figured I was a lady, you'd have walked right up?"

He didn't seem to think too long about it. "Most likely."

Corey bridled. She lifted the Spencer, aimed at a pine cone dangling from a low branch by the corral, and fired. The shot rang out, shockingly loud in the morning stillness, reverberating down the draw in an ever fainter series of cracking echoes. She had tried to brace her feet, but the recoil knocked her back anyway. Standing straight, she fanned the black powder smoke away from her face and pointed to the place where the branch tip had been.

"I can shoot as well as most men I know," she said, and levered another cartridge ready.

"That sure appears to be the case," Deck Hobbs replied. He eased down the rocks into the clearing in front of the cabin.

"Law or not, you'd best remove that gun belt," Corey ordered. She expected the man to refuse, but he shrugged and slowly unbuckled his single holster, holding it out to one side.

"Just to show my intentions are honest." He tossed the gun belt toward the porch, where it landed at Corey's feet. She recognized a Colt Peacemaker, polished bright as a silver teapot.

"What do you want of my husband?"

"Well, first off, I want to know why'd he leave you alone out here."

"I can take care of myself. Have often enough. Tom is gone a lot."

She noticed that Hobbs's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Where does he go?"

"Prescott, for supplies. Left two weeks ago and should be back anytime."

"Two weeks is a long time to buy flour and coffee."

Corey knew her face gave her away. Even a loaded wagon on muddy roads could do the twenty miles to Prescott in two days, yet Tom was seldom away less than a week or two. He'd always bring back a few pounds of pinto beans, or dried peaches, or coffee. He'd say he'd been looking to buy stock and tell her with glowing eyes how someday they'd have the finest herd in all Prescott, but she'd never seen him return with a single cow.

"He's probably buying stock," she said.

"How many head do you have?"

"Near thirty."

"Trouble with rustlin'?" Hobbs asked.

His comment rankled. She was painfully aware of the size and condition of their ragtag herd, most of them winter-starved strays Tom had found wandering

WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO TOUCH THE SPUN-GOLD SOFTNESS OF COREY'S HAIR? DECK THOUGHT. HE LIFTED HIS HAND TOWARD IT.

Dogtooth's gullies. "No," she shot back. "Takes time to build a herd when money's scarce. What concern is it of yours?"

"None," Hobbs said. She saw his eyes drift over the stone cabin, assessing the sagging roof on the rough log barn, the missing corral poles, the stark granite cliffs behind. "Strange place for a cow outfit, is all."

Corey dropped her gaze to a broken board on the plank porch. She had thought the same thing, wondered what Tom had been thinking, picking this lonesome spot, so rocky, so grass-poor.

She took a closer look at the stranger. His brown eyes were what she noticed most, for they managed to seem both hard and soft at the same time. They reminded her of a hawk's eyes, sharp and knowing. She doubted if he missed much.

"Tom an' I rode together," he was saying. "He may've mentioned Luke Traherne's outfit?"

"No," she replied. "He has not." Tom never talked about his past and Corey did not pry, figuring that what counted was who he was now, not the life he had left behind when he had married her a year before. "You were partners?"

"Most of seven years. Rode for three outfits, Traherne's last. Tom was the best cowhand I ever saw." His face conveyed a world of meaning. Why would a top hand pick a place like Dogtooth? Why would his stock look as gaunt and gutted as Corey knew theirs did? It didn't figure.

Deck Hobbs glanced at the sun, now midway up the sky. "Not to seem forward, ma'am, but I've a jack in my saddlebag would make a good stew, an' I cold-camped here last night."

Corey searched the man's eyes. They had lost their sharpness and were the dark brown of a shaded mountain pool—deep, calm, and clear.

She decided to trust her instincts. "Come along in," she said, keeping her voice smooth and steady. "Corral your horse. There's hay in the barn."

"Obliged," he replied, raising his hand to the brim of his hat before turning to retrieve his sorrel. "And I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"You didn't," Corey lied. "I'm no rabbit that scares at the first flick of brush."

"No, ma'am, I can see that. Not too many women'd call a man out like you did. I mean that as a compliment."

"And I take it as one," Corey answered.

"You can wash over there, Mr. Hobbs," Corey said when he returned to the cabin. She indicated a white china basin, soft brown soap, a clean linen towel.

Deck Hobbs took off his coat, set his hat on the table, and combed his hand back through his hair. The small mirror showed more gray along the sideburns than he'd remembered. It'd been a hard winter, a rough two years on the trail. Some days he felt as if he had covered every square inch of Arizona Territory, Mexico to Utah, and it had taken its toll.

He bent down, splashed his face with water, felt the woman's eyes on him, and glanced over at her. She reddened and picked up a knife to skin and gut the rabbit. She washed it, cut it in pieces, and put it into a kettle of water.

"I'm sorry we have no potatoes," she said. "Stew's better with potatoes." She reached out and gave the stovepipe a few good bangs with the metal cooking spoon. Hobbs heard the clink of creosote in the stove box.

"Isn't drawing too well," she explained. "Needs cleaning after winter, but I've been busy with the chores and the stock." She caught herself. "Tom and I have."

Town girl, he thought, *but no frills about her. No airs. Has sand, too. The kind of woman you could trust in a tough spot, and it looks like she's in one. It's Tom's doing and she's starting to wonder why. Can't say as I blame her.*

Corinna Sinclair grasped the coffeepot handle with a towel and poured him a cup. It was hot and strong, and he sipped gratefully.

The cabin was filling with the fragrance of simmering meat, pepper, and sage. "Coffee's real good," he said.

"Tom says I like it strong enough to skate a spoon on," she said, smiling. She turned to stir

COREY WAS TROUBLED BY THE FACT THAT SHE FELT MORE COMFORTABLE WITH DECK HOBBS THAN WITH HER OWN HUSBAND.

the stew and the sun slanting through the open door lit her hair, braided in a thick, silky rope down her back. Hobbs felt his eyes open and his breath catch. Trail life sure hardened a man, made him forget how nice a woman could be. What would it be like to touch that spun-gold softness? Before he could stop himself, he lifted his hand toward it.

She looked up from the kettle. "Soap's over there," she said, pointing to the soap dish with her spoon.

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered, relieved she had misunderstood.

Corinna Sinclair was an almighty good-looking woman. And old Tom was either a fool of the first water or a desperate man, leaving her to wear herself out on this hardscrabble excuse for a ranch.

He set the coffee cup on the washstand, bent down, and splashed more water on his face. This would not do. It had been a long time since he'd seen a woman this handsome, since he'd felt these feelings. He and Sinclair had had a parting of the ways and Sinclair was not his partner any longer, but he sure-fire had been, and would have followed Hobbs to the devil's back door to boot. And Corinna was Tom's wife. This would not do at all.

The towel felt crisp against his face; it smelled clean and fresh, like meadow grass. Women sure had a way of making a bare-walled cabin feel like home. Simple things like a clean towel or the bunch of dried wildflowers she'd put in an old tin peach can on the windowsill.

"Tom build this place, did he?" he asked.

"Fixed it. It was an old miner's cabin." She was chopping carrots and onions. "Took him the better part of last year. Walls are two feet thick."

Hobbs nodded. The single room was plain, not fancied up with woman things. No curtains—he'd noticed that when he had crawled up the boulder that morning and seen Corinna Sinclair standing at the bare window in her white undershirt. He'd known right off that Tom had been nowhere about. In truth, he had not approached the house like an honest man because the sight of his old partner's wife, skin creamy in the pink dawn light, her hair all loose, had set his blood rushing faster than two shots of Nogales tequila, and he'd laid back to rethink his plan.

The cabin was spare, all right. No whatnot shelf with china bric-a-brac on it, no dresser scarves with lacy edges. Just that scarlet and white quilt.

"My mother sewed it," the woman said. "Our wedding present. It's the Lone Star."

Hobbs realized he had been staring at the bed and averted his eyes, not wanting to appear to be entertaining unseemly thoughts. "Lone Star," he said, looking up at her. "Pretty name."

"I suppose," she answered in a faraway voice. "I didn't realize when I left Kansas how prophetic it would prove to be."

"Ma'am?"

She looked straight at him. "I mean that, as things have turned out, my mother could not have picked a more appropriate pattern. A lone star, blazing away in an empty sky."

He looked at her for a minute, at the startling blue of her eyes, at the way they burned.

Then she got out a dented tin bowl and began to mix biscuit dough, adding salt and baking powder in generous pinches, stirring in water with a fork, then kneading it, without giving it so much as a glance.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "This place is not much. But Tom works hard, hardly sleeps at night for worrying about the herd and all. It's not his fault everything is taking more time than we planned." They were the words of a loyal wife, Hobbs thought, but he couldn't mistake the doubt in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am." It was all he could think of to say, and he was not about to tell her that she'd far from read his thoughts.

"I can do without nice things. It is just that Tom seems to think that a strong woman should be able to do without people, without someone to talk to, without . . . tenderness." She was cutting the biscuits with a metal cutter, putting them on a tin sheet, sliding it into the oven. She ran a hand across her forehead, leaving a streak of flour.

"THINGS ARE GETTIN' INTERESTING," DECK SAID. "FOUR RIDERS JUST CUT OUT FROM THE TREES A QUARTER MILE DOWN."

Hobbs felt his breath come faster. He wanted to brush away the flour on her forehead and—he was an honest man and he had to admit it—to pull her into his arms. Instead, he watched her rinse her hands and dry them on the linen towel. They were roughened from work and winter cold, but they were prettier to him than the languid, dove-white hands of that singer, Stella Delmaine, he'd seen on the stage in Tombstone.

"I'd imagine," Hobbs said quietly, "it can get a little lonely out here."

She lifted her head and spoke with as much spirit as if she were giving an Independence Day speech. "Everyone feels lonely sometimes, don't they, Mr. Hobbs? You just get used to it, that's all." She untied her apron and laid it over the back of a chair.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe you do."

An hour later, they had eaten and were sitting on the porch, Corey in a rocking chair mending one of Tom's shirts, Deck Hobbs canted in a straight chair, his boots resting on the porch rail.

Corey kept her eyes on her stitching, but with each breath the spring scent of warming earth and the resin-filled sweetness of the afternoon sun on the pines stirred her blood. She was troubled by the thought that she felt more comfortable with this stranger than with her own husband.

"That was a fine meal," Hobbs told her for the second time, shining the barrel of his revolver on his jacket sleeve.

Corey smiled. There had been the stew and biscuits, and she had opened a jar of elderberry jam. Then she had used the last of the dried peaches for a pie.

I'd have done the same for Tom, she told herself, stitching down the torn corner of a pocket, but she knew as soon as the words formed themselves in her mind that it was not so.

Well, she thought, jabbing the needle in and out, *I am not a block of this everlasting Dogtooth granite. A woman can be strong and still like feeling appreciated.*

"Tom picked out a good spot for a lookout," Hobbs was saying. "Cliff behind. Open view down the draw. You could see anyone coming for five miles."

"I didn't see you, " she replied.

"Well, now, that's true." He grinned at her as he spoke and his eyes warmed. "But then you weren't really lookin'."

No, she thought, but I am looking now. She wondered what would have happened if she had met Deck Hobbs in Kansas instead of Tom Sinclair. Suddenly, she set aside the faded blue shirt and walked to the porch rail, searching the horizon for the wagon. The sooner Tom arrived, she felt, the better.

A dark speck crested the basin trail. "It's Tom!" she said.

Hobbs stood and looked. "Could be. Raisin' enough dust for a wagon and team." He holstered his gun. "How did you and that saddle bum meet, anyway?"

"In Abilene," she said. "I was engaged to be married, but my fiancé died in a railroad accident. Tom rode in with a trail herd soon after and saw me coming home from church. I guess you'd say he set his hat for me."

"Shows some sense, at least."

"I had only known him two weeks when we were married."

Hobbs's eyebrows raised. "Well, Sinclair always did move fast once he got goin'."

"Mr. Hobbs, Tom has been a decent and good husband to me, but I must face the fact that I married a man about whom I know very little. He doesn't speak of his past. Does he have something to hide? Was he in trouble with the law?"

Deck Hobbs was silent for a moment, watching a hawk circle in the sky, absentmindedly running his thumb along the silver edge of his badge. "Don't you think you should ask him, Mrs. Sinclair?"

"I take it that he was then."

"I want to believe he was not," Hobbs replied. "Wish I knew for certain. We kind of lost touch. See, Tom had figured on ramrodding Traherne's outfit. But the old man picked me and it didn't set well with Tom. He bolted. Joined up with the Box Four, near Mescal. Bunch of low-rollers. I couldn't see how Tom would want to be within a mile of that outfit, let alone throw in with 'em."

He walked to the porch rail. "One week after Tom quit, I'd

JIMMY'S FACE WENT SLACK WITH SHOCK. "YOU DIDN'T SAY NOTHIN' ABOUT KILLIN', CHARLIE. YOU DIDN'T SAY NOTHIN' AT ALL ABOUT IT."

taken the men into town for a few drinks, like we always did after fall roundup. The Four cleaned Traherne out, beat him to within an inch of his life."

"Did Tom . . . ?" She wanted to finish the sentence but could not.

"I don't know if he was with them that night or not. But they knew Traherne would be alone." Hobbs suddenly seemed to become aware of the fact that Corey was quietly rocking, her eyes fixed blankly on the cloud of dust along the basin trail in the distance.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You don't need to hear this."

Corey felt numb. Her parents had warned her that she was in no state to marry, just six weeks after Edward's funeral; that grief could play tricks on your feelings and it was too soon to know if she really loved Tom Sinclair. But Tom's talk of the ranch—how they'd plunge into the work of it, build it with their own hands into a spread they'd be proud of—had seemed to her like water after a drought. Had her heart betrayed her? Would she spend the rest of her life regretting her haste?

She felt Deck Hobbs's eyes on her, sensed his reluctance to continue.

"He will be here soon, Mr. Hobbs. I need to know the truth."

"I don't know the whole story," he said at last. "I don't know Tom's side of it. But I do know the sheriff in Tucson was investigating the Four an' must've got some powerful goods on 'em, because I found him five miles out of town in a gully, backshot."

"But that's murder! Tom could never . . ."

"I'm not sayin' Tom had anything to do with it. But he was ridin' with some sidewinders who'd've had no scruples about killin'. Cable Jeffers, for one. Pete Younkers is another hardcase. An' Lyman Jacks. Killed his own brother-in-law over a card game. They scattered like buckshot all over Arizona Territory. I've spent the last two years trackin' them down." He looked at Corinna Sinclair. "I've finally got the hombre I want."

She felt the blood drain from her face. "Tom?" The word came out as a whisper, barely audible.

Hobbs shook his head. "I'm after a fella named Charlie Creel."

Corey felt relief wash over her face like a wave. She tried to piece the situation together. The Creels had taken over the Iron Springs Ranch soon after Tom had brought her to Dogtooth Basin. "Then Tom knew Charlie before? Charlie Creel rode for the Box Four?"

"That's the size of it."

"But why in the world would Creel want a rundown place way up here? What kind of coincidence . . ."

"No coincidence at all, Mrs. Sinclair. And I aim to know why."

Corey realized with a start what Hobbs's intentions were. "But you can't, Mr. Hobbs! There's eight or ten men with the Creels. If you're thinking you can . . ."

"I can and I will," he said, his voice low and hard. "That sheriff they backshot was Ben Hobbs—my father."

He glanced down the trail again and his hands tensed at his sides. "Things are gettin' interesting. Four riders just cut out from the trees a quarter mile down and another bunch—can't tell how many—are comin' about a mile behind."

Corey stiffened. "The Creels?"

"Likely." Hobbs was buckling his holster, tying it around his thigh.

"But what about Tom?"

"Wagon's two miles back. The near riders can't see it for the trees. I don't know about the others. Wish old Sinclair would sprout wings an' fly, though. I could use some reinforcements."

Corey stretched herself to her full height, which was not more than five feet four inches in her boots. "You have reinforcements," she announced.

He looked at her and smiled. "I admire your nerve, Mrs. Sinclair, but I won't put you in danger."

"Mr. Hobbs," she said tersely, "I am almighty sick and tired of being left behind, left out, and left alone. I am in this as deep as you are."

"But, ma'am . . ."

"My name is Corey."

"Corey," he said. She'd squared her shoulders and gotten a determined look in her sky-blue eyes.

COREY'S FINGER RESTED NERVOUSLY ON THE TRIGGER. SHE FOUGHT THE DESIRE TO FIRE AT CHARLIE CREEL.

He didn't suppose he could stop her, and maybe he didn't want to. "Well, fetch that rifle, then."

"What is our plan, Mr. Hobbs?"

They had hidden themselves behind the fallen trunk of a big ponderosa back of the log barn. From their position, they could see the top of the basin trail, the clearing, the corral, the cabin porch.

"Thought we'd wait and see who shows up," Hobbs answered.

"Well, that's just fine!" Corey snapped. "Ten to one the Creels show up, and Tom unwittingly walks in and gets himself killed."

"Tom Sinclair never unwittingly did anything. And he might be in with 'em, for all I know."

Corey lowered the rifle. "Tom could not do anything truly bad, could he, Mr. Hobbs? I am embarrassed to think of it, but you know my husband better than I do."

"Maybe," Hobbs responded matter-of-factly. "We've been in a few scrapes together. An' except for leavin' Traherne, he never let me down. I'll say that."

His gaze down the draw intensified. Muffled hoofbeats thudded on the dirt. "Here they come. I'm goin' to try something. Keep that barrel aimed at Creel, or whoever the head man is. Don't shoot until I give you a signal."

"All right," she whispered. She braced the gun barrel on the tree trunk. Deck Hobbs, still crouched next to her, took out his revolver, checked the loaded cylinder, and reholstered it. Seconds later, four riders appeared at the edge of the clearing.

"It's Charlie, all right," Corey whispered. "The red-haired one's Jimmy Creel. I don't know the other two."

"Just as well I'm not bettin' on this hand. That's Pete Younkers and Lyman Jacks." Suddenly, Hobbs turned to Corey and took her chin in his hand. "Listen now. There's a time to be independent an' a time to follow orders. No matter what happens, do not let Creel take you, you understand? Don't play hero on my account. I've seen how he operates. Run and hide till Tom gets here."

"And if Tom doesn't get here?"

"He'll get here. But if he is . . . delayed, stay hid."

Fierce determination burned in her eyes. "I will not let you down, either, Mr. Hobbs."

Hobbs reached out and let his fingers trail down her cloud-soft hair. "You couldn't if you tried."

Corey's eyes widened, but before she could respond, Hobbs had disappeared into the trees. She heard the creak of leather and the soft jingle of bit chains as the horsemen dismounted.

"Don't look like they's home, Charlie," Jimmy said. His hat was tilted back on his rust-colored hair. He looked like a wet-eared kid next to his hard-boiled brother.

"Leastways, that's how they want it to look," said Charlie, strutting across the clearing toward the cabin. The water bucket was by the steps. He gave it a kick across the dirt. "We'll just take us a gander. Hobbs rode with Sinclair. This is where he'd come to."

The others walked behind him. Charlie drew his gun. Younkers and Lyman followed suit. "Pull your gun, you pea-brained fool," Charlie whispered fiercely to Jimmy.

"Why?" Jimmy asked.

Charlie swung around and threw his fist into Jimmy's stomach. "Because I said so!"

Jimmy bent over and held his middle a second, then straightened up and drew, breathing hard. Corey sighted the shotgun on Charlie's gut. *He makes one wrong move,* she thought grimly, *he'll have a stomachache worse than the one he just gave Jimmy.*

Deck Hobbs had moved quickly and soundlessly around the barn and suddenly emerged in the clearing.

"Hello, Creel," he said. "You lookin' for me?"

Charlie's mouth dropped open, then he bared his teeth in a twisted grin. "Well, isn't this handy?" he said. "Here I thought I'd have to go to some trouble and you come out to meet me like the town social committee. Your old partner around?"

"No."

"Well, that's a downright shame. I was hopin' to get two birds with one bullet."

Jimmy's face went slack with shock. "You didn't say nothin' about killin', Charlie. You didn't say nothin' at all about it."

"Shut up," his brother snarled

CHARLIE STARTED TOWARD THE BARN. "UNLESS YOU WANT TO DIE WHERE YOU STAND," COREY SAID, "YOU'LL GET ON YOUR HORSE AND RIDE OUT."

over his shoulder. "So it's just you, Hobbs? Or has that pretty Mrs. Sinclair been keepin' you company?" His predatory gaze searched the clearing. "Jimmy," he barked, "go along and find Mrs. Sinclair. Tell her to put on the teakettle an' get out the good china, the neighbors have come callin'."

Jimmy holstered his gun and went eagerly into the cabin. From her vantage point behind the log, Corey could see him glancing around inside, then leaning out the door.

"Nobody's in here, but they's some rabbit stew on the stove. Do you think Mrs. Sinclair would mind? I'm awful hungry."

"Help yourself," Deck called. "It's mighty good stew."

"You got rocks for brains?" Charlie hollered at his brother. "Git out here and do what I said." Jimmy came out of the cabin, chewing on a biscuit, and scampered over to the barn.

"There's nothing to find," Deck said to Charlie. "She's long gone."

"So you'd like us to think," Charlie sneered. "More likely you want her all to yourself." He looked around the clearing and a thought seemed to occur to him. "Ly. Pete. How strong is that tree limb over there?"

The two men turned to examine a sturdy branch about fifteen feet off the ground, jutting from the ponderosa by the corral.

"You want me to test it?" Jacks asked.

"Yes, sir," Charlie said, rubbing his chin. "I think that's exactly what you should do. When I hang someone, I do the job right. I wouldn't want a body to suffer needless pain 'cause of a half-broke neck. I'm a fair man, Hobbs."

"Luke Traherne might not agree," Hobbs said evenly. "And neither would my father. If Sheriff Ben Hobbs was alive today, you'd be down in the hole at the territorial prison, if you hadn't already swung."

Charlie's eyes narrowed to slits. "Your pa was tryin' to frame me. He wanted to git his hands on that reward an' couldn't find the real killer, so he picked on me. I warned him."

"By shooting him in the back?"

"He just wouldn't let up," Charlie replied, taking the measured tone of someone who knew he had logic on his side. "Didn't give me no choice. I guess you inherited his interferin' ways."

Corey could see Hobbs's back tense. She half expected him to draw his gun. But he settled his hat on his forehead and stared calmly at Creel.

"Well, maybe I'll give you a choice, Creel. Try me."

Jacks had ridden to the tree and thrown his lariat over the branch. He gave it a few good pulls.

"It'll do," he called, spitting tobacco juice in the dust.

"You had your chance, Hobbs," Creel growled. "You been doggin' us for two years an' I'm gonna hang you, just like you hung Rysdale and Jeffers and Jerry Stokes."

"They were cold-blooded killers. They had their fair trial in Tucson and got the punishment they deserved. So will you."

"You're startin' to get on my nerves, Hobbs, just like your cowardly pa did."

Corey tried to read Deck's thoughts. He was staring coolly at Creel, but he seemed to be listening for something. The rest of the riders? The wagon?

All she knew was that if she had to sit helplessly by while Charlie Creel spouted abuse at Deck Hobbs, she'd scream. Orders or not, she left the shelter of the log and crawled quietly toward the barn. She had almost reached the bank wall when her boot caught on a twig, snapping it with a loud crack. Hardly daring to move, she looked up at the open doorway and saw Jimmy Creel staring down at her.

"Jimmy?" Charlie shouted. "That you?"

"It's me," Jimmy called back, smiling soulfully at Corey. "I'm pokin' through the hay with a pitchfork."

Corey stood up and crept over to him. "Hello, Jimmy," she whispered softly. The boy's smile grew to a grin that showed the gap where three front teeth were missing. Corey figured she knew how Jimmy had lost them, and the thought made her blood fairly boil.

"Stay here with me," she told him, "and then later I'll heat up that stew and fix you some bis-

THE BROTHERS SCUFFLED FOR THE GUN, ROLLING IN THE DIRT AND KICKING UP DUST. THEN SHE HEARD A SHOT, STRANGELY MUTED.

cuits and jam. Would you like that?"

Jimmy nodded. She recognized the look of adolescent love in his eyes and realized with a pang that one way or another, Jimmy Creel was going to get hurt.

She glanced out toward the clearing in time to see Younkers shove his guns into Hobbs's back and Jacks level his at Hobbs's chest. Charlie Creel strolled over and lifted the Colt from Deck Hobbs's holster.

This isn't going right, Corey thought, trying not to panic. After all this time searching out the last of the Box Four, why would Hobbs let them disarm him without a fight? She eased around a stall and noiselessly worked her way to the slatted front door. The rifle barrel just fit between the boards.

"Get on with it," Creel growled.

Jacks pulled Hobbs's hands to the front and tied them. Hobbs made no effort to resist.

Corey's finger rested nervously on the trigger. She fought the desire to fire at Charlie, knowing that if she shot now, Younkers would empty both barrels into Hobbs's back, then turn on her.

"Mrs. Sinclair's a mighty sweet lump of sugar, ain't she, Hobbs?" Charlie was saying. He pulled a bowie knife out of his belt and ran a finger along the blade. "I always had it in mind to cut her long yellow braid off as a keepsake."

"You take scalps, do you, Creel?"

"Shut up!" Creel brandished the knife an inch from Hobb's face. "I'll carve your face like that low-down Yankee carved mine. Where is she?"

"She could be anywhere from here to Prescott. I don't know and I don't particularly care."

"Is that right? Well, we'll see if a noose around your neck flushes any birds out of the brush."

Corey's mind was racing. What did Hobbs think he was doing, anyway? If he was stalling for time, hoping Tom would arrive, he was playing for foolishly high stakes.

At that moment, she heard Jimmy stepping softly through the hay. He signaled that he was going out. Corey frantically shook her head. "Stay," she whispered. "There may be shooting."

He looked at her for a moment, then smiled and walked out into the slanting afternoon sunlight.

"I looked ever'where, Charlie," he called across the clearing. "She ain't here."

"She's here, all right, an' I have the feelin' she'll show herself right soon. String him up, Pete."

Younkers looped the rope and threw it over Hobbs's head.

"Don't do it," Hobbs said, looking at him steadily. "You don't have to be party to this murder. I'll testify on your behalf." Younkers hesitated.

Creel's menacing laugh echoed across the clearing. "You're talking to someone who's killed five men that I know of an' probably five more. You expect him to believe there's a judge or jury in this whole territory would let him off?"

"He's right, Hobbs," Younkers said.

" 'Course I'm right," said Creel. "Cut this jabber and get him on Jack's horse."

They hoisted Hobbs into the saddle of the big black and threw the rope over the branch, pulling it taut.

Creel raised a hand, as if for silence. "Never let it be said that Charlie Creel hung a man without giving him his last words."

Deck Hobbs stared impassively at Creel and said, "You'll hang, Creel. Sinclair will make sure of that."

"That's where you're wrong. Sinclair dances to my fiddle."

Corey felt her heart stop, but she kept her eyes on Hobbs. He seemed to glance down the draw, then he twisted slightly in the saddle and flashed his eyes in Corey's direction.

All in the same moment, Creel slapped the horse's rump, the horse reared and ran, a rifle shot rang out, and Hobbs's body lurched upward and then fell, hitting the ground with a thud. The rope swung listlessly in the air, its dangling end singed black.

Creel gave Hobbs's motionless body a vicious kick with his boot. Hobbs groaned and opened his eyes just as Corey levered the next shell. Creel spun, lifting his revolver toward the sound.

"Well, well," he called in a taunting voice. "Pretty as paint an' shoots good, too. Looks like Hobbs was willin' to hang for you, Mrs. Sinclair. But maybe it's just

DECK SHOWED LITTLE INCLINATION TO RELEASE COREY FROM HIS ARMS, AND ONLY SHERIFF NEWLIN'S STARE CAUSED HER TO LET GO OF HIM.

as well he did not. Now he will get to see how far you're willin' to go for him."

"No, Creel!" Hobbs's shout came out a hoarse whisper.

Creel laughed. "You can lie there in the dirt and watch, Hobbs. An' then I'll kill you."

Charlie started toward the barn, grinning as he saw Corey step to the open door, her rifle trained on his chest.

"Unless you want to die where you stand," she said, "you'll get on your horse and ride out."

"Brave talk, Mrs. Sinclair, mighty brave. But I don't think you'll shoot me. I rode with Tom. We was partners. Still are."

"You are no partner of Tom Sinclair's." Corey watched him come closer. Her hand felt frozen on the trigger. Charlie smiled, the scar twisting his mouth.

"Let's me an' you talk. I could set you up a nice herd."

"Corey!" Deck called.

"Shut him up," Creel spat at Jacks, "but don't knock him out. I want his eyes wide open."

"No," Jacks answered. "I won't be party to harming a woman. I got sisters."

Creel turned to Pete. "Younkers? You gonna get squeamish?"

"I'm with Jacks. I don't hold with that kind of thing."

"You turn on me, you'll regret it."

"Maybe so, Creel, but we're out." They gathered their horses, swung into their saddles, and rode down the trail.

Charlie shrugged and turned to his brother.

"Well, Jimmy," he said, "I guess you're gonna become a man today."

Shaking, Corey sighted and pressed the trigger. A loud click echoed across the silent clearing. Frantically, Corey tried to eject the cartridge, but the lever was jammed.

Charlie seemed unfazed. "I didn't think you had that much gumption in you, pretty lady," he said.

Corey shifted the rifle and held it like a club, waiting. Charlie was ten feet from her when Jimmy dived from behind at his knees, knocking him to the ground. Charlie's revolver discharged and Corey heard one of them groan in pain. The brothers scuffled for the gun, rolling in the dirt and kicking up dust. Then she heard a second shot, strangely muted, and Jimmy fell limp across his brother's body.

"Jimmy!" Corey cried, running to him. Hobbs had stumbled to his feet and reached the two brothers just as Corey did. He picked up Charlie's revolver with tied hands and held it in front of him.

Jimmy lay sprawled faceup, blood dampening his shirt at his shoulder.

Corey put her ear to his chest, gave a sigh of relief, and pressed the palm of her hand hard against his wound. Charlie did not move, and Corey saw that he was dead.

The boy winced and his eyes fluttered open.

"Ma?" he whispered.

"Lie still," Corey said, stroking his forehead. He needed a bandage. She stood and ran to the cabin. Grabbing her scissors, she cut a big section from the skirt of her town dress and ran outside again, tying the calico snugly around Jimmy's body.

"I think he'll do," Hobbs said.

Corey reached beneath Jimmy's thigh, pulled out Charlie's bowie knife, and cut the ropes that held Hobbs's hands. A sudden tattoo of hoofbeats preceded Henry Newlin, riding his buckskin hell-for-leather, into the clearing.

"Thank God," he cried, climbing stiffly from his lathered horse. "I thought I might be too late."

"You cut it a bit fine, Sheriff," Hobbs drawled, rubbing his neck.

"I'm not as young as I used t'be, an' that's a fact," Newlin said, shaking his head. "Tried to get here at noon like we planned, but two of Creel's men led us on a wild-goose chase up the Yavapai. We got 'em." He turned to Corey. "You all right, young lady?"

"Yes, Sheriff," she said quietly.

"I've got two deputies with me," Newlin went on. "We caught Younkers and Jacks down the trail." He looked at Creel's body with disgust. "This one's no loss to anyone but his mother."

He turned to Deck Hobbs. "Help an old man out, son."

"Help an old man out, son," Newlin said.

Hobbs hoisted Charlie Creel's body onto the sheriff's horse, then

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covered it with a tarp and tied it down.

"Your husband's wagon's not far behind," Newlin said to Corey. The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the horses and wagon careened into the clearing. "Hobbs! Newlin!" Tom exclaimed. "What happened?"

"A little altercation with some of our old outfit," Deck Hobbs said.

Tom looked as if he'd been slapped across the face. Then he noticed his wife and said, "I told you you could handle anything Creel dished out."

She smiled weakly and straightened her shoulders, wishing she'd been able to find more comfort in her husband's words of praise.

Then Deck Hobbs walked over and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight against his chest. Corey knew she should not, but she closed her eyes and let herself be held for several long seconds.

"I am glad you're all right, Mr. Hobbs," she said at last.

"I am glad you can shoot as well as most men you know," he replied. "I was afraid you might shoot Creel instead of the rope. Thought the last thing I would see in this world was you, glaring at him over that big rifle barrel. Wouldn't have been a bad way to go out, at that." He grinned at her, then his expression turned serious. "You saved my life."

"And you saved mine," she said, looking up into his eyes. "You hardly know me, yet you would have hanged to keep Creel from finding me."

"Gladly. I'm afraid it wouldn't have done much good, though."

"It did more good than you know."

Tom was watching with a strange look on his face. "Corey?" he asked haltingly. "Hobbs?"

Deck Hobbs showed little inclination to release Corey from his arms, and only Sheriff Newlin's openly curious stare caused her to let go of him. She did, walking to her husband's side. "It's just . . ." She started.

"No." He stopped her. "Don't say it. Never complain, never explain. Right, Hobbs?"

"That's what you always used to say, Sinclair. I don't know how smart it is, though." Corey heard an edge in his voice and saw Tom's eyes narrow.

Newlin stepped between the two men. "I'll take the boy with me in your wagon," he said. "We'll get him to a doctor. Ellie'll watch after him. Oh, by the way, Corinna, she said to tell you to come for tea."

"I will," Corey replied. "Soon."

Hobbs led his sorrel out of the corral.

"Stay on a few days," Tom said, but Corey thought his voice did not sound convincingly sincere.

Hobbs shook his head. "Better that I go."

"Maybe so," Tom answered. "But before you do, I want you to know I never rode on Traherne that night."

"I figured you didn't."

"I'm ashamed I left the old man for the Box Four, but I realized my mistake. I tried to start over. Picked the loneliest spot I could find an' married the nicest girl in Abilene. Creel followed me here. Had me tradin' stolen stock in exchange for him keepin' quiet."

Hobbs threw the saddle on his sorrel and tightened the girth. "I guess it wasn't much of a bargain, was it?"

Tom shook his head. "Bargain with the devil, expect to get burned. What do you figure I've earned for my trouble?"

"I'm not interested in you, Sinclair. You sure miscalculated an' you may have spilled some information to the Four, but you didn't do murder. I got the man I was after."

"You're giving me better than I deserve," Sinclair said.

"You already have better than you deserve," Hobbs said, glancing at Corey.

Anger flared in Sinclair's eyes. "Now listen here, Hobbs . . ." Then he looked at his wife, who was looking back at him with a kind of longing in her eyes that he did not understand. "I was about to say, maybe you're right. You usually were. Maybe now Corey an' I can have the life I wanted for us. Move closer to Prescott, find some decent land, make a fresh start."

"I would like that, Tom," Corey said.

Hobbs mounted and started his horse down the trail, then pulled the reins up short. "Mrs. Sinclair?"

"Corey," she corrected him.

"Corey. I've been thinkin' about what you said, about that lone star. Even if it feels like you're the only one, there's other stars, y'know, blazin' away in that same big sky."

She smiled back. It was strange, but she felt as if part of her was riding off with this stranger and part of him was staying there with her, and that neither one of them would ever be as lonely as they had been at the moment they had met.

"I wonder where he'll go," she mused aloud.

"He didn't tell you?" Henry Newlin asked. "You're looking at the sheriff of Tucson. Wouldn't wear his father's star until he'd caught the men who killed him. Now he can."

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Call of the Cow Country

BY
HARRY
WEBB

From the time I was eight years old, Wyoming had been my lodestar, and as the years dragged, its pull had grown even stronger. Montana had its big cow outfits, but it was to be many years before I realized it. I knew nothing but mines. First coal mines, then hard-rock mines.

From the day I was twelve until I was fifteen my hands were either cupped around a shovel handle, as I mucked in my father's hard-rock tunnel, or swinging a double-jack for the old man. (My father was perhaps fifty, but to us kids he was the "old man.") And with every wooden-wheeled wheelbarrow of muck or clank of the eight-pound sledgehammer, my thoughts were on the cow country of Wyoming.

There was a euphonic something in the state's very name that spelled romance, attracting me as the North Pole pulls the needle of a compass. My older brother, Charley, had never been one to hang around the old man after he was old enough to find work, as the two just didn't jibe. He had written once in four years from Lander, Wyoming, saying he was punching cows, and from that day on my lot became even harder to bear and I vowed I would find Charley in that far-off land of my dreams and also become a cowboy.

My chance came one late-November day in 1903, fifteen days after my fifteenth birthday. It was totally unexpected, too. The old man was drilling a down-hole and I was striking for him. I could swing either a single- or double-jack all day and center the drill head, but this time fantasy had me around big herds of bawling cattle and the double-jack smashed the old man's hand.

Yowling a curse, he yanked out the drill and yelled, "Arry, hi'll break your bloody neck for this!" He was Cornish so he always left off his *h*'s when they should have been on and vice versa. The drill only whacked me once across a shoulder as we raced down the tunnel, then, as I leaped off the dump, it whizzed past my head. When the old man said he'd do this or that to any person, he usually made good his promise, and I had sense enough to know I would never attain my goal of becoming

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a cowboy if I had a broken neck.

Our log home was on the west side of the Grand River below the Red Gorge Canyon and the mine was on the east side at the head of the mile-long gorge. We always walked a narrow trail up the west side of the big river and crossed back and forth above the rapids in a homemade boat. To this day I'll never know why, in my flight, I didn't grab the boat and leave my irate old man stranded.

Working my way down the canyon, through precipitous cliffs, where the wild water churned directly below, I reached an old trapper's cabin directly across the river from our cabin. Old "Dad" Stanley talked many an hour that night trying to dissuade me from my decision to take one of our horses and head for Wyoming.

"You damn kids runnin' off," he snapped, "make me sick! Done the same, though, myself. But after I growed up an' knew the heartbreak of havin' one o' my own run off, I've wished many a day an' night I'd stayed home another few years. Never saw 'em again. Heard long afterward, when it was too late, they'd needed me in their old age an' wondered a heap about me."

Although this talk made me feel bad, it didn't lessen my desire to head north. "Someday," I told him, "when I get plenty of money and a fine outfit, I'll come back. The folks don't care about me, anyway." That was the rebel in me talking.

The next morning I watched through a knothole until I saw the old man go up the canyon, then had Stanley row me across in his flat-bottomed boat. On reaching home I found my two younger sisters and our kid brother hanging on to our crying mother and squalling bloody murder. I couldn't savvy why all the fuss about me being gone, as I'd often went over old Stanley's beaver trapline with him and stayed overnight without letting the folks know.

But I soon found out it wasn't me they were all crying about. Our mother had entered a contest in the *Comfort Magazine* and the winner would get a free trip to the St. Louis World's Fair the next year. She had found the seven faces in a bushy tree and the weekly mail carrier had brought a letter the day before saying she was a winner. That is, providing she found fourteen faces in the next month's issue.

Mother was positive she could work the next month's puzzle but was boo-hooing because she didn't have a thing to wear, even though the fair was half a year hence.

Mother didn't try too hard to persuade me not to leave, saying, "I don't much blame you, Harry. Your father's a brute, but I hate to see you running aimlessly all over the country like Charley. Tim Mugrage wants a boy to help with the work on his farm, and at twenty dollars a month, you can soon buy yourself a horse and saddle. A rolling stone gathers no moss, you know, so I think you should work near home and—"

"And neither does a settin' hen lay eggs!" I shot back at her, my mind past the arguing point. "I'm going to take Yampa's three-year-old gelding and get away before the old man gets back." I'd asked the old man every week for a year to give me this bay colt, and all I'd ever got out of him was a grunted "We'll see."

Mother tearfully dug up two dollars she'd got for boarding Lee Miller, a prospector, and which she was hoarding for her trip to the St. Louis fair. Seeing her and all the kids crying made it a tough decision, and at the last moment, I almost weakened. But Wyoming was calling in a louder voice than my family's crying, so I rode away wearing an old jacket of the old man's and with nothing but a bridle on Star. I didn't say good-bye. My throat was closed too tight.

I made good mileage that day, and after spending seventy-five cents for a late dinner and horse feed in Steamboat Springs, I realized at that rate, my money wasn't going to hold out long. I began to see that once you left home it cost money to eat, especially with a horse to feed. Well, Star, my horse, would have to eat even if I didn't! His were the legs that had to carry me to that golden mecca.

All I knew about my goal was that it lay far to the north, and using the Big Dipper's two bottom bowl stars to keep me on my northerly course, I traveled late that night, reaching a spot on the Little Snake River just beyond a

Stanley talked many an hour that night trying to dissuade me from my decision to take one of our horses and head for Wyoming.

hamlet called Slater. I was searching for a spot where I might find grass for my horse. At that time of year grass was scarce, but a town meant my money would take wings in a hurry.

Fortunately, campfires loomed up and I found myself in a large camp of Gypsies. A Gypsy woman had once cured my mother's headache for fifty cents when we lived in Steamboat Springs and I'd admired Gypsies ever since. They were fine, honest people. These folks took a liking to me and after picketing my horse inside a barbed-wire fence where the grass was tall, and where their horses were hobbled (they had cut the wires), they fixed me a dandy supper and rustled up some blankets for me.

The next morning they had all the horses around the wagons and the women were cooking breakfast when I woke up. They were all so nice I was hoping they, too, were going north so I could stay with them, but no such luck. They were following the river down to the Yampa River and maybe going on to the Green River, where they would winter.

After breakfast a tall, hatchet-faced man, with rings big as dollars dangling from his ears, hit me up for a horse trade.

"We can't let a boy like you go bareback," he said. "You've got to have a saddle. Now, we have a fine bay here and we'll let you have him and the saddle for your horse and five dollars. Your horse is a dead mate for that chestnut one there, and by having a mated team, we can sell them. Otherwise, we wouldn't part with him for love or money."

I said I didn't have five dollars, but I might trade even. Their horse was a nice-looking animal and I was so chafed from riding bareback that that saddle, while not much to look at, was a big inducement. "Oh, let the boy have them for his horse and *two* dollars," a pretty woman said. "He's a nice boy and I want him to have a saddle to ride all that distance."

I hated to part with Star, but I thought it would look a lot better if I had a saddle when I rode into a cow outfit asking for a job. "Well," I said, "if you'll throw in that harmonica you were playing last night, I'll give you a dollar and we'll call it a trade." After a lot of jabbering I didn't understand, she climbed in one of the covered wagons and came out with the harmonica.

I don't think I ever got more comfort out of anything than that saddle and especially the mouth harp. The bay was a dandy animal and all regrets and fears quickly vanished. I was as free as an eagle and when I wasn't galloping or trotting, I had that harp in my mouth. I was cutting due north, no road, no nothing except blue sky above and vast rolling country ahead.

Several miles lay behind and I was playing "Blue Bell," the Spanish war song, and thinking those Gypsies were either fine folks or crazy in parting with this horse, when suddenly the bay's head began jerking up and he fell over on his side, nearly breaking my leg. I was sure he was dead, and mumbled, "Oh, Lordy God! Now what'll I do? I'm afoot with a saddle!" But as suddenly as he had fallen he was on his feet as if nothing had happened.

I had gone several miles, following up a nice stream, and was still shaking from my scare, so to calm myself I was trying to play "The Yellow Rose of Texas," when the bay reared straight up and fell over backward. This time I wasn't so lucky. The saddle horn rammed into my ribs and for a moment I thought *I* was the one who was dead.

My horse was on his feet before I was able to get up and was walking away, dragging the reins off to one side, and every time I tried to catch him he would start trotting. My ribs hurt so bad I could scarcely breathe, let alone run, and it was some time before I was able to catch him.

But I had learned one thing. At least I thought so. This blamed horse simply didn't like my brand of music! From then on the harmonica stayed in my pocket. I was going along humped over the bay's neck when up went his head and he dropped as if brained with one of the old man's sledgehammers.

This time I took stock of things. I had heard enough about horses eating the loco weed to know this critter was locoed about as bad as possible. Those Gypsies had known this and instead of being the wonderful people I had admired, they were a band of crooks! I called down every curse on them that I had ever heard and invented a few of my own.

That horse fell over backward, on his side, or simply on his head so many times during the next few miles that I lost track. But I had learned to pile off whenever

he began trembling or jerking his head. I had followed that stream until it suddenly bent to the east, and although I hated to leave it, I knew my goal wasn't in that direction. I had consumed gallons of creek water, on account of being feverish, and to leave it had me worried.

> **"This'll knock the spots out of your fever," Rasmussen said. "Use it all the time for my horses. It's aconite."**

There was a wagon road leading off to the northwest, which meant little to me. It might be five or a hundred miles to any habitation for all it told me, but roads always led *someplace,* and even though darkness was closing in, the road buoyed me up a bit. I was taking a last big drink, as no telling when I would see water again, when I heard the squeak and rattle of a wagon coming down the hill to the north.

When the man pulled up his four-horse team at the stream, I was never more glad to see a human. That is, so long as it wasn't a Gypsy. All humped over, I led my horse to the wagon just as the man tossed the lines to the ground and climbed down a front wheel.

"What in Sam Hill yuh doin' out here?" he asked, but before I could answer he said, "What's the matter, yuh got a gut ache?" It didn't take long for me to groan out my trouble, where I was from, where I was going, and about my horse cutting his crazy didoes.

"Them damn Sicilians would skin their own mother if they could get a nickel fer her hide!" he said. "But, by God, you're in man's country now, and soon's I git unhitched we'll see about fixing you up. Tie that animal to a wheel and lay down till I c'n git us organized."

In a jiffy the teams were unharnessed and hobbled, and he was rummaging in the jockey box below the footboard. "This'll knock the spots out of that fever," he said as he mixed something from a bottle with a little water. "Use it all the time for my horses. It's aconite. Freighters never go without it. Course, with horses we sprinkle a batch o' the pure quill on some paper an' ram it down their throat. Drink 'er down."

I had never heard of aconite and hesitated. I was wondering if he, too, was locoed and maybe this horse medicine would kill me dead.

"Down with 'er!" he demanded. "She's a smaller dose an' diluted."

"Tastes like Sweet Spirits of Nitre," I said, once it was down.

" 'Bout the same," he said, "only a hell of a lot potenter. Eat up your kidneys if I give yuh a horse dose." In a few minutes, instead of finding myself dead or my kidneys "eat up," I felt a lot better. It sure killed my fever and even my side didn't hurt like it had.

"I'm go'nta picket that bughouse horse o' yours so he can't run off an' leave yuh. Then t'night we'll tie him up an' let the bastard eat wagon-wheel hay." From that moment on I loved that rough, tough, bushy-whiskered man.

"Now, before I start cookin', we'll have a look-see at them ribs. Well," he said, after feeling around, "one thing, they ain't busted." Going to the jockey box, he came back with a bottle.

"What's that?" I asked, though not caring what it was.

"Mexican Mustang Liniment," he grunted, pouring out a palmful and slapping it on my ribs and over my right kidney. "Horse sprains a tendon, we rub a batch o' this in. Burns the hide right off if we rub it too hard, but she sure knocks out a sprain.

"Take the hide off clear t'your insides if I rubbed 'er in," he grunted. "But we ain't rubbin' 'er in. Just pattin' 'er on. Bet yuh'll feel better in two shakes of a wampus cat's tail."

"It's better already," I was happy to tell him, thinking if he was a specimen of Wyoming's folks, I sure wasn't going to be homesick for my own for a long time to come.

Sitting around the campfire that night, I learned this creek was known as the Savory (the spelling is mine) and his name was Rasmussen. He owned a homestead on this road halfway between the Savory and Rawlins. He was hauling this load of winter supplies to "some folks way east of here. Husband got all smashed up when a stacker boom broke durin' hayin'. . . . No, not particular a close friend, just a neighbor. 'Bout forty miles from my place to his'n an' twenty-five miles from my shack t'Rawlins. You'll stop at my place tomorrow night. The old woman'll be powerful glad t'see a new mug. Don't see many folks along this road."

I opened up and told him all about my old man being a Cousin Jack and me being a good miner myself. I also told him about my mother entering the World's Fair

contest and how she was all ready to go and crying something awful because she didn't have a fit dress to wear. At this he sure laughed. But when I mentioned that I intended to get a job punching cows up around Lander, he looked pretty solemn for a minute, then, getting rid of a big cud of tobacco, he said, "I wouldn't put too much stock in gettin' a cowboy job right off if I was you. You're a bit—" Just then my horse slammed back on the halter rope, breaking the halter and falling over backward.

"That's a God-awful poison, that loco weed," Rasmussen allowed as he hurried to get another halter on the horse before it took off in the darkness. " 'Tain't the weed itself. The weed's a mild narcotic, all right, and a horse gets just like these fellers they call morphine fiends. In the late fall, after the plant's all et up, the horse paws out the roots. They're crazy for it an' if there's been enough plants around, the horse soon gits crazy as a loon. Never gits over it, either.

"I don't recommend unloadin' him on some poor sucker, but if you can make it to Rawlins without him killin' yuh, I'd advise just turnin' him loose an' catchin' a ride with some freighter. Lots o' freighters 'tween Rawlins an' Lander. Well, reckon we best hit the blankets an' warm the ground fer a spell. I'm a light sleeper so whenever the worms start workin' in that critter's skull, I'll hear him an' see that yuh don't have t'pack yer saddle from here t'Rawlins."

I won't attempt to record the number of times that handsome bay threw himself before I rode up Rawlins's main street, but the moment I rode into a livery barn to inquire about freighters going north, the liveryman had his eyes on my horse.

"Nice-lookin' nag you're riding, bub," he said as he walked around my mount. "Steal him?"

"Nope," I said, mad at his remark. "Traded a chestnut sorrel for him." I started to ask about freighters, but he wasn't listening.

"Give you a good trade on him," he went on. "I see he's broke to harness, and I've a dead match for him—blaze face and all."

Being broke to harness was news to me! Maybe my horse wasn't locoed after all. Maybe he just didn't like to be rode! But then he'd had *one* fit when tied up. "What makes you think he's broke to harness?" I asked.

"These little gray collar marks, that's how. Sure you didn't high-grade him?" He saw I was getting madder by the second so he changed his tune. "Just fooling, bub," he said, laughing. "Just wanted to get your dander up. Allus say something like that. Come here. I want to show you something." I followed him to the big feed lot out back.

"See that dun-colored horse there? That's the best saddler and cow horse that God ever built four legs on. But like I said, I need a mate for that bay there in the corner and I'll swap you the dun for yours. You can . . ."

I was thinking so fast I quit listening. Those Gypsies had given me the same talk about needing a mate for one of theirs so they'd have a matched span. On the other hand, this man wasn't a Gypsy, and now that he'd got down to business he was a pretty nice fellow. I thought of Rasmussen's advice. I thought of getting to Lander in style. I didn't have to think about being all but penniless. That part, I knew.

"That dun won't buck, will he? I'd have to have a gentle horse if I traded."

"Buck? Ha! That's rich! Listen, kid, you could explode a box of dynamite under him and he'd stay as decomposed as your grandma at a knittin' bee!"

"I reckon he would, all right," I said, having to laugh at his words. I'd heard my old man and prospectors talk "decomposed granite" until I was an authority on this "decomposed" stuff.

"If he's what you say he is," I said, thinking how Gypsies always demanded a little money to boot in a trade, "I might trade with you for ten dollars to boot. I know what *my* horse is, and—"

"Ten dollars!" he exploded. "Listen, boy, you can *buy* most any horse in this whole damn country for ten dollars!"

"I'm broke," I said, "and if I part with my horse I've got to have some money."

"I'll go for five," he snarled, "and not a penny more! Besides, if you're broke you'd still be broke, wouldn't you, if we didn't trade?" As dumb as I was, I could see the logic in that last remark.

Those Gypsies had given me the same talk about needing a bay so they'd have a matched span.

"Seven dollars or no trade," I squeaked, itching all over for that five and praying my horse didn't throw a fit any second.

"Tell you what I'll do, young gobbler," he bargained, taking a look in my horse's mouth, "I'm so damn tired of looking at that lousy cap you're wearing, I'll go for five dollars and there's a pretty

good cowboy hat hanging there in the harness room I'll throw in for good measure." Going to the harness room, he came out with the hat and edged it over my ears. "There, now you look halfway human." I was so elated over the hat I couldn't speak. "And I'll throw in a good supper and breakfast at the restaurant," he added, "and you can sleep in the harness room. I'm by God tired of this dickering!" I guess he thought I still wouldn't trade.

Before I could get my wits together he had unsaddled the bay and booted him out to the feed racks. I was glad of that, because I was in mortal fear my steed would kill the deal.

That night, with a big supper inside me, I should have slept like a pup, but sleep was the last thing on my mind. I'd had a look at myself in the restaurant and to say I was pleased with my reflection would be an understatement. But there was something else that haunted me. I had discovered a pair of boots hanging among some horse collars and wished I'd spied them before closing the horse deal.

In the morning, as soon as it was light enough to see, I had the dun saddled, and fearing this man may have unloaded some old outlaw on me, I was leading the saddled dun around the corral when the liveryman called from the stable door: "Dandy animal, ain't he?"

"Yeh," I replied. "Only he steps around mighty funny. Like he wanted to buck or something."

"Prob'ly got a kick on a leg," he said. "Horses are always scrapping when they're feeding. Come on. We gotta go put on the nose bag ourselves."

At breakfast I worked up courage to mention the boots. Those I had to have; even if it meant parting with some, or all, of my money.

"If yuh can wear 'em," he said, "take 'em. Prob'ly throwed away by some cowhand." At that my appetite faded. With those boots, big hat, and a good horse—not to mention my five dollars—I was in what my mother used to call seventh heaven.

The next morning we were no more out of the livery barn than Buck (as I called him) bogged his head and had me "hangin' an' rattlin' " before he quit bucking. But once we were out jogging along the freight road, my mind reflected on my good fortune. Lander, where the livery-stable owner had said cowboys were "thicker than fiddlers in hell," lay but 155 miles across the desert. A huge, blue sky above me and tranquility within, I forwent my desire for a while to hurry and played the mouth harp. When I finally kicked Buck into a gallop, he seemed to stumble a lot, which I attributed, as the man had said, to being "kicked on a leg."

I took great pleasure in looking down at my shadow, adjusting my hat to various angles, and assuming a cowboy stance in the saddle. And whenever my mind returned to the locoed bay, I eased my conscience with the thought that maybe—just maybe—the horse was only balky under the saddle. One of my old man's horses would balk so bad at times with nothing but an empty buckboard she would throw herself over the tongue and it would take hours to get up some little rise.

Buck, I found, was tough as whet-leather and never seemed to tire and I was several miles past a stage station when I overtook a jerkline team of ten all-white horses, two wagons, a feed cart, and a camp wagon. The driver, riding the near wheel horse, said he was going to Lander and invited me to tie my horse on behind and travel with him. "Good bunk and plenty grub in the camp wagon," he said, "and you'll be a heap of help to me."

His outfit only moved two or three miles an hour so I declined his invitation. I was in a hurry to get to Lander, find my brother, and get to punching cows.

Shortly after passing the freighter, I was surprised to see a cowboy-looking man limp onto the road from up behind a long, upthrust dike of rocks that lined either side of the road for several hundred feet. He said he had done a lot of bronc busting in Montana but had been "wrangling stage horses at the stage station back the road." He had got drunk and lost all his wages in a poker game the night before, got fired, and was "hoofing it" to the 71 Ranch on the Sweet Water, where he hoped to get a job breaking horses. A bronc had broken his leg in Montana was why he limped —so he said.

Karl was a comical fellow and

Karl was a comical fellow and we got real chummy. He was an old-timer and he told about a lot of hair-raising experiences.

we got real chummy and on account of his bad leg we took turns riding and walking. He was an old-timer, maybe forty or so, and told a lot of hair-raising experiences, which made the time pass quicker but slowed me down a lot toward getting to Lander and finding my brother Charley.

It was my turn to ride, as the run-over boots had worn blisters on my heels from walking, and for no reason at all Buck stubbed his toe and all but tossed me over his head.

"Let me have a look at his feet," Karl said. "He may have a rock caught in his frog. Nope, nuthin' wrong there." I told him about Buck maybe getting a leg kicked in the corral, so he felt and jabbed Buck's legs. "Solid as a rock," he reported, and began looking in Buck's eyes. "Oh ho!" he exclaimed. "How old did that jasper say this horse was?"

"About eight," I replied, as Karl was looking in Buck's mouth.

"Eighteen—or twenty-eight—would come a damn sight closer to it! Hasn't had a cup in a tooth for years and he's parrot-mouthed! Not only that, he's blind as a bat. Kid, you've been took with a capital *T*."

I got off and looked, expecting to see no eyes at all, but Buck's eyes *were* a bit scummed over. "He's still a good horse," I said, by way of consoling myself.

"Darn good," Karl said. "Been a real cow horse in his day."

This softened my remorse over passing off my locoed horse on someone I'd thought was such a nice man. I now fervently hoped the bay was locoed and would get worse by the minute!

"You can't trust nobody anymore," Karl commiserated as we went along. "Well, you're at least five bucks ahead of the deal, anyway. And from the looks of that sky off there we'll need some of that five to get under cover tonight. Sunshine in this damn country one minute and a blizzard chops your face to pieces the next! We sure don't want to get caught out tonight!"

The freighter told me he would bet me that "Karl" was one of the "Hole in the Wall" gang and that his real name was Tom O'Day.

A strong wind had sprung up from the north and I said, "What'll we do, Karl? It's getting pretty late."

"Well," he said, looking back, then ahead, "there's a stage station in that big pass there. That's Crook's Gap and I'd say it's about four miles. So I think one of us better jog along after a bit and see about us stopping. We can sleep in the barn, so that won't bother us. It's the horse feed. Some of these stations run short of hay except for the team changes. Hay's usually a dollar a flake but I know where I worked they wouldn't let you have an ounce for five dollars sometimes. Meals are only four bits, but we may have to do some tall talking for horse feed. Lots of freighters stop there and may want hay, too."

Sometime later (Karl was riding and the sky had darkened and the wind swept our voices away) Karl yelled, "She's gettin' worse by the second, so maybe one of us better hightail it on ahead and see what luck we have."

"I can walk better than you," I said, "so *you* go. You know more about these people than I do."

"Might be a good plan at that," he said. He had gone but a few yards when he trotted back. "Maybe I best take that five along. Money talks louder than my mouth, even in this damn wind."

"Good thing you thought of it!" I shouted back, and dug out my cherished greenback.

The awful wind took my breath away and it was now snowing so hard I couldn't see more than a few feet and my heels hurt so bad I had to sit down and bandage the blisters with torn pieces of my bandanna. It seemed I had walked a lot farther than four miles, where Karl had said the station was, and still no station.

As I stumbled along my thoughts lingered on what Karl had said about us better not being caught in a blizzard at night, and I began to get panicky, running against the icy blast and falling down. Then, when I had despaired of ever reaching the station, I heard dogs barking and there was a light but a few feet away. A young woman and her young son ran the station, but my joy quickly curdled when she told me no rider had stopped there.

"Fred," she asked, "did anyone on a horse stop at the barn?"

"No'm," the boy said, "but I saw a man gallop by an hour or two ago." At that I was so downcast I could only falter through my predicament.

"Well, don't you worry," the lady said. "There will be stages and teams going to Lander and you're welcome to stay here as long as you want to. But I know one thing. Whoever that man was, he'll never have any luck in *this* world and surely none in the next!

He'll suffer for a mean trick like this. The Lord will see to that!"

I hoped he'd suffer, but there was little consolation in what happened to Karl now or after he was dead. My outfit was gone and I had but a few nickels to my name. That night a stage stopped to change teams and while I was helping Fred hurry with the four fresh horses, I was so fascinated with the two big headlights on the Concord Coach that I forgot all about my loss. "Oh, yes," Fred said, "they drive straight through from Lander to Rawlins and the same back to Lander."

The storm lasted all that night and until evening of the next day and when my freighter friend pulled in, I hurried to tell him my troubles and accept his offer of taking me with him. How I wish I could remember that station lady's name, because it wasn't until we were camped at the Sweet Water Crossing that I discovered she had slipped two dollars in the inside pocket of my old overall jacket.

The freighter (a Mr. Selfrige or Sellers, something like that) said, "I'll bet there's something about this river they never taught you in school." I told him I'd never even heard of the Sweet Water until Karl mentioned getting a job there.

"Well, sir," he said, "I'm going to tell you something that few folks know and can hardly believe after they do know it. But the head of this river and the Big Sandy River both head from the same spring. It's on a divide in the Wind River Mountains. The Sweet Water goes to the Atlantic Ocean and the Big Sandy goes to the Pacific. Now what do you know about that?"

I didn't know anything about it and could only say "Jiminy Crickets! Is that right?"

One day when I made a good ride, "Peeky" St. John said, "By God, you can outride your brother Charley forty times over!"

"A fact," he said. He knew lots of things. He told me he would bet me his jerkline horse against a hole in a doughnut that this "Karl" was one of the "Hole in the Wall" gang and that his real name was Tom O'Day. "I heard in Rawlins O'Day had been seen around town. Probably looking over a bank for the gang to rob."

"Karl wouldn't be a bank robber," I said, "even if he did steal my horse. He had no money and said he'd been working at a stage station."

"That's the way they work. Rob a bank or hold up a stage, then they cache the money, scatter out and work awhile at cow punching, or even shoveling hay, until things cool down. That throws off suspicion."

"But why would he take my horse and five dollars?" I wanted to know. It didn't sound like good sense to me.

" 'Cause he wanted to get back to their hideout in the Big Horn Mountains damned quick, that's why!"

Well, sense or no sense, and no matter if he was O'Day or Karl or whoever, he'd sure put the kibosh on my riding into Lander in grand style, like I'd pictured myself doing.

It was a lucky thing I had the two dollars, because no one in Lander knew where my brother was. Some said he had taken off for Colorado; others thought he was down in the Lost Cabin country breaking horses for the Wimsey and Johnson Outfit.

No matter, he wasn't in Lander. I was on my own, and instead of being a cowboy riding the range, I worked at everything from washing whiskey bottles in Bill and Joe Lannigan's Saloon to pearl diving in the Chinese restaurant. First time I'd known washing kettles and pans was called "pearl diving." The Chinese owner was a fine man and owned a ranch on the Sweet Water. I sent my mother a postcard saying I was fine and had a job "diving for pearls." Guess when she got that card she thought bats had invaded my belfry.

Some weeks at this and I graduated to jobs in Ed Farlow's and Welch's livery stables. By then I was acquainted with several cowboys from various outfits all over the country, and especially from the Big Horn Basin, where the really big cow empires were.

I had also made friends with a lot of fine town kids about my age and older. Their dads owned saloons, stores, or livery stables, and those kids were wild and woolly and great bronc riders. Lee and Lon Welch (their mother ran the Cottage Hotel right near Mr. Welch's big livery barn), "Peeky" St. John, "Stub" Farlow, and "Brocky" Jones were the best bronc riders of any of the town kids. They would run in a herd of wild Indian horses (the Shoshone reservation lay but a short dis-

tance north of town) and ride them all day long. Then there were dozens of hard-bucking horses around the livery stables to ride and the harder they bucked and the meaner they were, the louder those kids would let out war whoops. Talk about bronc riders!

But freckle-faced Brocky Jones was *my* hero. He'd chop a horse up with his spurs as he yelled "Powder River! A mile wide and an inch deep!" Brocky drank like a lumberjack but was a barrel of fun.

It wasn't long until they had me tackling the broncs and although I'd ridden pigs, calves, and bucking burros down home, I found riding a squalling bronc was something of another class. Sometimes I made a fair ride but mostly I hit the ground. The kids would tell me I was doing fine, so I'd spit out a gob of corral manure, tuck my shirttail back in, and repeat the performance. As Brocky remarked weeks later, "If we'd of give Harry two bits every time he got piled, he could buy himself the best ranch in Lander Valley!"

I was usually going around limping and sporting a peeled-up face from being thrown, kicked, and tromped on, but "practice makes perfect" someone had said and I sure got plenty of that. By spring I was riding the snakiest broncs we could dig up and barring nothing. Of course, like Brocky and the rest, I occasionally bit the mud, but it wasn't a habit anymore and one day when I made a good ride on a big brown gelding, "Peeky" St. John said, "By God, you can outride your brother Charley forty times over!" This accolade, coming from one of the state's finest contest riders, convinced me I was ready for the cow outfits.

I had made very little money during the winter but once spring and fine weather came, it seemed the town had more money than Mr. Carter had liver pills. Longline freighters, stage drivers, cowhands, sheep herders, and hundreds of soldiers from Fort Washakie all but poured money in the gutter.

In fact, any day, it was nothing to pick up silver or bills in front of a saloon and there were lots of saloons.

The funny part was, jobs went begging because no one would work. Everybody had too much money. Everyone, that is, except yours truly.

Ranchers would hurry up and down the sidewalks and in saloons offering three dollars a day for men to clean ditches or build fences, only to find no takers. A man came up to me and said, "What's got into all you damn loafers and parasites, anyway? Here I'm offering four dollars a day and board for somebody to shovel last year's sand out of my ditches but not a damn mother's son of you will take a job!"

"Show me the job," I said. "I've swung a double-jack and shoveled muck in mines, so your job is a first cousin of mine." I'd learned from my bronc-riding friends to talk tough. I also had seen enough to know if I expected to hit up a cattle baron for a job, I damn well better have a horse and saddle between my legs.

The job was right at the south end of town, across the Popo Agie River, and I'd only been working a week when one day my long-lost brother came riding out along the ditch. I didn't know the whiskered stranger at first, but after crying a bit I managed to get down to sensible talk. He'd been breaking horses for George Wimsey down by Lost Cabin, all right, but had quit.

"Well, you didn't try very damn hard to find me!" he said when I told him somebody had said he might be down there or in Colorado.

He had a fine horse and outfit, angora chaps and all; even a big six-shooter and cartridge belt buckled on. That made me more determined than ever to work on this ditch, or anything else, until I also could have the same things. I thought maybe he had lots of money and was going to help me out when he asked, "How you fixed for money, kid?"

"Fixed pretty good," I said, then quickly added, "but I can sure use some more!"

"Who the hell can't!" he grumbled. "I'm about broke, so I'll have to borrow five or ten from you."

He didn't admit it but I figured he was a drinker or gambler. But I was sure of one thing. He could pull all my teeth out with his fingers easier than he could wheedle me out of a penny. My clothes were ragged but I was saving for a horse and saddle even if I had to go naked like that Godiva woman I'd seen a picture of.

I talked Charley into taking a job on this ditch, which he didn't

Jobs went begging because no one would work. Everyone had too much money. Everyone, that is, except yours truly.

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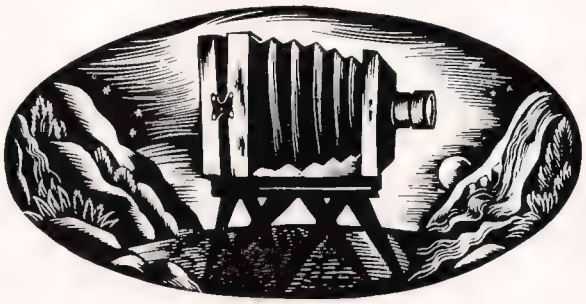
like doing. I didn't fancy it either, but that was beside the point, and by the middle of May I had bought a fine saddle horse from a drunken cowboy who had gone broke in a saloon and said he was "shedding this blasted country forever!" His home was in Rapid City, South Dakota, so he hopped a stage for Rawlins.

Charley spent his money as fast as he made it, even though I talked myself blue in the face. Every day or two he would want to borrow five dollars and said he'd pay it right back. But he didn't know all the hell I'd gone through to get to Lander. Oh, he knew it, all right, but just wasn't interested. But I decided I wouldn't trust him any further than I would a Gypsy. Yes, or that Rawlins liveryman or Karl whatever his name was. So Charley went on shoveling ditch!

On a beautiful day about the last of May he threw down his shovel and said, "To hell with this! Any damn fool can dig a ditch! How'd you like to go down to the Big Horn Basin with me? The Dickie Brothers have several broncs they want broken and I hear Col. Torrey at the M Bar is hiring a lot of cowboys, so if I don't take the Dickie job we'll go to the M Bar. There ought to be some little job you could handle. It's a cinch you couldn't ride a bronc and the horses with roundup wagons are snuffy, too, so—"

"The hell I can't ride a bronc!" I cut in, knowing my wild and woolly brother would soon get the biggest surprise of his twenty-one years.

As we rode out of Lander the next morning I thought it was the most beautiful day of my life. But I suppose its beauty was greatly enhanced by knowing the fulfillment of a mining kid's dream and destiny lay but seventy-five miles due north.



"HIS ALTAR WAS THE MOUNTAINTOP..."

JEDEDIAH SMITH

BY GRIFFIN OLIVER

THE ROLL CALL OF THE mountain men—those formidable first pathmakers who trapped and explored the West from the high Rockies to the Rio Grande, from the Mississippi to the Pacific Coast, in the decades following the Lewis and Clark expedition—is a list, with only a few exceptions, of forgotten men. Everyone knows of Kit Carson, who began his mountain roaming in 1826 and who became the backbone of John C. Frémont's Rocky Mountain explorations. Jim Bridger is a familiar name—he was one of William Ashley's original party of trappers who, in 1822, first journeyed up the Missouri and became the most skilled of all mountain men in surviving in the wilderness. Jim Beckwourth is vaguely recollected as a black man born a slave in Virginia who came West, trapped in the Rockies, married into the Crow tribe, and became a war chief. And some may recognize the name Hugh Glass, another Ashley man, who was immortalized by Frederick Manfred in his novel *King Grizzly*, and in John G. Neihardt's epic poem *The Song of Hugh Glass*, for his three-hundred-mile

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"crawl" in 1823 down the Grand River of present-day South Dakota after being mauled by a grizzly and abandoned by his partners.

But who remembers today, 150 years after their era waned, the lives and deeds of such men as Manuel Lisa, Tom "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick, Peter Skene Ogden, Ceran St. Vrain, "Old Bill" Williams, Joseph Reddeford Walker, Joe Meek, James Clyman, William Sublette, Etienne Provost, Ewing Young, and Robert Campbell?

And who remembers Jedediah Smith?

Jed Smith—so respected he was called "Captain Smith" and "Mr. Smith" by men who rarely deferred to anyone—carried a butcher's knife in his belt and a Bible in his bedroll. He became among the first to cross the Rocky Mountains at South Pass, first to cross the Great Salt Desert, first to cross the Sierra Nevada into California (and back), first to travel overland from California to Oregon, first to travel the length and breadth of the Great Basin.

Jed Smith, nine years in the West, dead at age thirty-two, a man described as "half grizzly and half preacher" by his peers and by historians as the greatest of all mountain men—who remembers him?

The man who filled in blank spaces on the map of the pre-settlement West came into the world a long distance from where he would make his name. He was born Jedediah Strong Smith in Jericho, now Bainbridge, in the Susquehanna Valley of southern New York, on January 6, 1799. His mother was Sally Strong Smith and his father also bore the name Jedediah—a significant name for religious folk who raised their children under unwavering Methodist beliefs. (In Samuel II in the Old Testament, Solomon, the second son of David and Bathsheba, who as a man would become the third and last king of Israel, also bore the name Jedediah. The name, one to live up to, means "beloved of the Lord.")

BEING INTRODUCED TO THE NEWLY PUBLISHED JOURNALS OF THE LEWIS AND CLARK EXPEDITION WAS A SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN SMITH'S LIFE.

The Smiths moved to Erie County in northwestern Pennsylvania in the early 1800s and at about the age of twelve, Jedediah was taken under the tutorial wing of a local physician with the memorable name of Dr. Titus Gordon Vesparian Simons.

In 1812, the Smith and Simons families moved to farmland on the southern shore of Lake Erie and the younger Jedediah, now a tall, lean, God-fearing lad of thirteen, found work as a clerk on a Lake Erie freighter. In this period a significant event in his life occurred when Dr. Simons introduced his young charge to the newly published (in 1814) journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Jed pored over this book almost as assiduously as his Scriptures, and it is said that he carried this volume, and his ever-present Bible, in all his travels to the end of his life.

No one is certain of his movements between 1814 and 1822. The Smith family had permanently settled in the farm country of the Western Reserve of Ohio by 1817 and young Jedediah apparently continued to work on Lake Erie, nurturing an ambition to travel west and become a geographer. Sometime in the spring of 1821 he made his way to Illinois, spent the winter near the Rock Spring rapids of the Mississippi, and early in 1822 crossed the river to St. Louis, gateway into the western wilderness.

For a man pining to make a foray into the largely uncharted western lands of the Louisiana Purchase, Smith's timing was very nearly perfect. His arrival in teeming St. Louis—population about five thousand and the center of the rapidly growing fur trade—coincided with a notice appearing in the *Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser* on February 13, 1822, that seemed almost written with him in mind:

TO
Enterprising Young Men

The subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years. For particulars enquire of Maj. Andrew Henry, near the Lead Mines, in the county of Washington (who will ascend with and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis.

The notice was signed Wm. H. Ashley. As Jed Smith soon learned, Ashley was the Virginia-born lieutenant governor of Missouri. He had come out to St. Louis in 1802, engaged in business, land speculation, soldiering, politics, and in the burgeoning fur trade. Early in his Missouri years he became a neighbor and friend

of Maj. Thomas Henry of Pennsylvania, a lead mine owner and veteran fur trader. He, like Ashley, had served on the western frontier in the War of 1812.

The two men pooled their funds to invest in the beaver trade up the Missouri and into the Rocky Mountains. The ad in the *Missouri Gazette* provided them with the manpower they needed to launch this momentous effort. Jed Smith found his way to Ashley's office in St. Louis and must have appealed to the forty-four-year-old Virginian. Smith at age twenty-three was a rangy, clean-shaven six-footer with soft blue eyes and a self-possessed if somewhat pious and humorless manner. He neither smoked nor drank nor used profanity, but Ashley had no doubt his newest recruit was intelligent, ambitious, capable of hard work—and maybe even a leader of men.

The outcome of the meeting was described laconically by Smith in his journal: "I called on Gen'l Ashley to make an engagement to go with him as a hunter. I found no difficulty in making a bargain on as good terms as I had reason to expect."

Ashley's notice had been somewhat vague on the purpose of ascending the Missouri River, but there was no secret in the mission: the enterprising young men were to trap beaver.

The Ashley-Henry expedition that boarded keelboats and headed up the Missouri from St. Louis that summer of 1823 consisted of ninety men. A good many of them were waterfront toughs recruited from grog shops and cribs in the town. Some were already shrewd in the ways of the trapper's world—rough-hewn, ready men with wild manes of hair, scrubby beards, and eyes in a perpetual squint from working under a pitiless mountain sun; men wearing buckskins decorated with beads, porcupine quills, and Indian talismans and carrying Kentucky rifles, French *fusils* (pronounced foo-SEE), and other muzzle-loaders (the Hawken became favored some years later), and their ball, powder, and personal items—which they called "possibles"—in an elk- or buffalo-hide bag.

SMITH WAS THROWN AMONG BOTH THE RABBLE AND THE MEN WHO SOON WOULD MAKE THEIR MARKS ON THE WESTERN WILDERNESS.

Jedediah Smith was thrown among both the rabble and the men who soon would make their marks on the western wilderness. Men such as Jim Bridger, Hugh Glass, the Irishmen Thomas Fitzpatrick (later known as "Broken Hand" after his left hand was shattered when his rifle blew up) and Robert Campbell, Mike Fink—celebrated from Pittsburgh to St. Louis as a brawler and master keel-boatman—and James Clyman, a Virginian who later served with Abraham Lincoln in the Black Hawk War in Illinois.

The Ashley-Henry expedition reached the Yellowstone River on October 1 and the recruits built a cottonwood-log stockade, called Fort Henry, on a narrow spit of land on the right bank of the Missouri above its confluence with the Yellowstone, gateway to the Rocky Mountains.

Jed Smith wintered at Fort Henry while Ashley returned downriver to recruit men, amass supplies, and prepare for the next season's trapping. In the spring of 1823, Major Henry sent Smith and a few men by pirogue (a large dugout canoe) to find Ashley and bring supplies and horses to the fort. In returning to the Yellowstone with Ashley and seventy men in two keelboats and several pirogues, this "Falstaff's battalion," as James Clyman called it, came ashore on May 31 at a point on the left bank of the Missouri where two Arikara villages were sighted. The "Rees," as they were called, had horses to trade; Ashley negotiated with their chiefs.

On June 2, as Ashley and his men returned to their boats, a sudden violent thunderstorm broke, keeping the trappers huddled on a sandbar at the river's edge. About six hundred Rees took this opportunity to attack the white intruders. Firing their British-made fusils, the Indians killed fifteen of Ashley's men and wounded twelve others before the survivors scrambled to their boats and made their way downstream.

Jed Smith escaped the Ree attack unharmed and volunteered to go ashore at the previous Ashley rendezvous point, get a horse, and ride ahead to notify Major Henry of the calamity. The result of this mission was the gathering of a punitive force that chased the Arikaras from their villages the following August.

In the autumn after the Ree incident, Smith, now past the tenderfoot stage of his mountain career and already a dependable hunter and trapper referred to by his comrades as "Captain," probably because of his innate leadership skills, joined Clyman and Fitzpatrick and ten other Ashley-Henry men in a venture across

the plains south of the Yellowstone in search of new beaver grounds. During this journey Smith had an encounter with a grizzly bear, and in a few desperate seconds had his ribs broken and his scalp torn away at the hairline, exposing the bone of his skull and leaving his ear hanging loose at the side. Clyman sewed the scalp and ear back in place and later wrote: "The bear had taken nearly all his [Smith's] head in his capacious mouth, close to his left eye on one side and close to his right ear on the other, and laid the skull bare to near the crown of the head, leaving a white streak where his teeth had passed. One of the captain's ears was torn from his head out to the outer rim . . . then I put my needle stitching it through and through, over and over, laying the lacerated parts together as nice as I could with my hands."

Smith recovered from this hideous disfigurement, although he carried the scars from it the rest of his life and wore his hair long to cover the mutilated ear.

The trappers worked and wintered on the Wind River and in the early spring moved on, drifting north, setting their traps and searching for new beaver country. In March 1824, Smith and his party apparently found what was later to be called South Pass, the western gateway through the Rocky Mountains. (This discovery is subject to some debate. Fur traders in the employ of John Jacob Astor were probably the first to find the pass and Smith, Clyman, and the others may have reached a point some distance south of it. In any event, Smith, Etienne Provost, and others, in their 1824 journeys as Ashley-Henry men, opened what later became known as the Oregon Trail.)

Smith and six others, now including Jim Bridger, continued on, penetrating deeper and higher into the Rockies. By September they had reached the territory of the Hudson's Bay Company in northwestern Montana and spent the winter of 1824–25 at the company's Flathead post.

Smith, Clyman, and their party rejoined their trapper comrades on the Green River in June 1825 for the first of what became known as the annual "rendezvous." This great gathering of mountain men served as a sort of trade fair in which furs were sold and trade goods purchased, while also affording an opportunity for socializing and carousing after the long winter trapping season. Smith brought 668 beaver furs to that first rendezvous—a record catch for a single trapper at the time. More significant, after Andrew Henry sold his half of the partnership to Ashley, Jed Smith was taken on as Ashley's partner.

At the end of the rendezvous Ashley headed back to St. Louis with $50,000 in furs, while Smith continued trapping and exploring for new beaver grounds until the next year's rendezvous. (Ashley subsequently sold his interest in the fur trade company to Smith; William Sublette, a Kentuckian; and David Jackson, an older man said to have fought with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814. The partnership lasted four years.)

Jed Smith's first great exploration journey began in August 1826, following the second annual rendezvous. He set out from Cache Valley, Utah, heading south of the Great Salt Lake with seventeen trappers and the never-ending mission of finding new beaver territory. He led his party south to the Sevier River, then on to the Colorado, crossing it to the Black Mountains of northwestern Arizona. Two of his party had deserted, half his horses had died, and Smith and the fifteen others were half-starved and nearly out of water when they emerged from the mountains in a broad valley and made their way to a village of then-friendly Mojave Indians, where they rested for two weeks.

In November, the Captain led his men westward across the Mojave Desert and into the San Bernardino Valley. On November 27, the weary and bedraggled trapper company arrived at the San Gabriel Mission near Los Angeles, completing the first overland crossing of the southwestern route to California. They were at first welcomed by Mexican authorities, but soon fell under suspicion. Beaver trappers were unknown in California at the time and Smith had difficulty in explaining his mission and profession. Mexican officials ended up calling him a *pescador* (fisherman) and considered imprisoning him in San Diego until they could figure out what he and his ruffian crew were up to in coming uninvited to Alta California. Only the intervention of the master of an American trading ship anchored in San Diego Harbor kept this from happening, and in the spring of 1827, Smith and his men were ordered to leave California by the route they had used to come there.

In defiance of the order, the Yankee trader captain took Smith north to San Pedro Bay. There he was reunited with his trapper party and, equipped with new provisions and horses, retraced his route over the San Bernardino Mountains. But instead of returning to American territory, Smith led his party to the San Joaquin River Valley—which proved to be rich beaver grounds—and wintered there.

In May, after trapping along the Stanislaus River and amassing a season's haul of 1,500 pounds of furs, Smith and his men tried to cross the Sierra Nevada via the American River but were turned back, losing five horses along the way, by the heavy snow in the passes. Leaving his main party behind, Smith and two oth-

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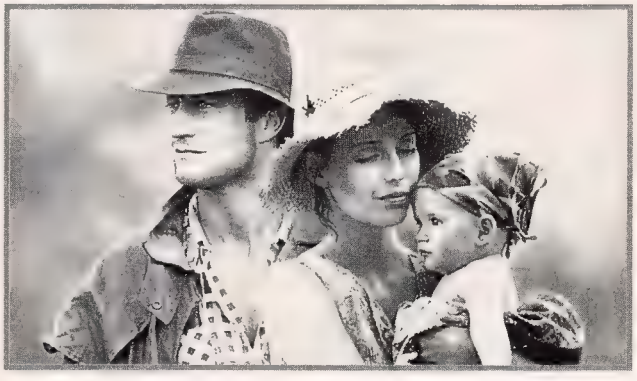

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ers made a second attempt and succeeded in crossing the range at what is today Ebbetts Pass. Jed Smith and his partners thus became the first white men to cross the Sierra Nevada range and added another record by completing a passage through the Great Salt Desert. Their journey of six hundred miles ended in July 1827, in time for the annual rendezvous on Bear Lake on the present-day Utah-Idaho border.

After the Bear Lake gathering ended, Smith and eighteen other trappers headed south and picked up the trail they had blazed to California. On August 15, 1827, they reached the Mojave village on the Colorado. Unlike the first visit, when they were welcomed, the Mojaves, tired of being victimized by trappers who had found them easy marks for theft and abuse, attacked Smith and his party as they crossed the river. Ten of the white men were killed, their horses and supplies captured. Smith and eight survivors managed to escape, making their way across the desert on foot.

In mid-September, the Captain and the remnant of his party rejoined the other trappers on the Stanislaus and Smith traveled on to the San José Mission to buy provisions. There he was arrested and jailed briefly before posting bond and agreeing to abandon Mexican territory. As before, he did not leave—his righteousness did not, apparently, apply in keeping his word with Mexican authorities—but rejoined his men and spent the winter of 1827–28 in southern California. The furs gathered by the trappers in Smith's absence and those accumulated in the winter season were sold to a sea captain and the proceeds used to buy 250 horses and mules to sell at the 1828 rendezvous.

But instead of moving eastward across the Sierra Nevada, Smith led his party north along the California coast, through unmapped

Beaver: the Mountain Man's Gold

In Jedediah Smith's time, the rivers and streams of America teemed with beaver, and almost from the beginning of settlement in the New World, beaver fur was so prized and became so valuable, especially in European markets, that early trappers called these pelts "hairy bank notes." The French in Canada in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the first to exploit and export beaver skins, followed by Spaniards, Englishmen, and Americans. The British, after defeating the French in America in 1763, established a monopoly in the American fur trade and the Hudson's Bay Company spread the trade across the continent to the northern Rockies.

CASTOR CANADENSIS was an industrious, sociable, monogamous, scaly-tailed aquatic animal with tiny eyes, well-suited to seeing under water, and sharp yellow teeth capable of felling a five-inch tree in a few minutes. An adult beaver weighed on average sixty pounds and had a glossy coat, tan to dark brown in color, of oily, waterproof fur that had a natural tendency to mat or "felt." The beaver subsisted on water plants and tree barks and lived in a dome-shaped water-damming lodge made of branches and mud.

To gather beaver skins in Smith's time, each man carried a half dozen or more heavy iron traps, weighing five pounds each. These were baited with a twig smeared with castor, the musky secretion of the beaver's perineal glands. In mountain country or in streams small enough for the animal to dam, the trapping was done in winter months—the only time when the furs were prime—and were placed at dusk by wading into bone-achingly cold water to plant them on the stream bed.

The trapped animals, dead by drowning, were raised at dawn and skinned on the spot. The castor glands and tail—a delicacy when fried—were saved and the hide was scraped and stretched on a frame for drying, then folded, fur-side in, and bundled.

The skins, called by mountain men *plews* (from the French *plus,* meaning "more"), each weighing up to two pounds, were worth four to six dollars per pound in St. Louis; a bale of plews might weigh as much as a hundred pounds.

Average grade beaver skins were used by European hatters to make the tall-crowned "stovepipe" hats that were fashionable for decades on both sides of the Atlantic, and also for other hats, from tricorns to ladies' riding helmets. The finest skins were sold to furriers for capes and muffs and other luxuries for the wealthy.

At the peak of the beaver trade, a hundred thousand furs were harvested in a year, but by the mid-1830s, the business began a serious decline. Not only was the animal overtrapped and becoming scarcer, but the demand plummeted with the introduction of the silk topper and hats made of other, cheaper materials.

and untrammeled country in the omnipresent duty of discovering new beaver locales. They reached the Klamath River in Oregon in May 1828. This expedition, the first to travel California south to north into the wilds of Oregon, resulted in the third of Smith's four fateful Indian fights—Arikaras, Mojaves, and now the Kelawatsets on the Umpaqua River, with whom Smith and his men traded for food and provisions. The captain and two other men set out by canoe on July 14 to discover a route northward across the Calapooya Mountains to the Willamette River, and during his absence about a hundred Indians entered the trappers' camp and massacred eighteen men. Only one man escaped into the woods, made his way to the coast and north a hundred miles to the Hudson's Bay post at Fort Vancouver. When Smith and his two companions returned to the Umpaqua camp on August 10, they were fired upon from the shore and beat a retreat to a high point on the opposite shore, where the deserted camp could be seen in full view. Smith sadly concluded—correctly—that his men were dead. The next month he brought his two companions to safety at Fort Vancouver and returned to the northern Rockies the following spring.

His 1827–29 travels from the Mojave to the Columbia River comprised the first crossing and exploration of what has become known as the Great Basin, a region that is still the least populated in the United States.

Smith rejoined his trapping partners for the 1829 rendezvous and for the next year continued to trap the upper Missouri and Yellowstone. In August 1830, apparently tired of the hardships of life on the trail and stating that he missed "the care of the Christian Church," he sold his trapping interests to his partners and, now a man of moderate wealth, returned to St. Louis in retirement.

He chafed at inactivity from the start and within a few months, with his former partners, William Sublette and David Jackson, pooled funds for a venture in the profitable Santa Fe trade. The men bought twenty-four wagons of trade goods and in April 1831, Smith, his old crony Tom Fitzpatrick, and seventy-four men left St. Louis for New Mexico.

In late May, after several days of searching for water in the arid country between the Arkansas and Cimarron Rivers, Smith and Fitzpatrick rode ahead of the caravan to find a streambed in which to dig for water. The two men took separate trails and, as later evidence indicated, on May 27, 1831, Smith found a water pocket in an old buffalo wallow in the Cimarron. What he could not know was that the wallow was closely watched by a band of Comanches. Legend has it that Smith was able to get a single shot off from his Hawken, killing the leader of the Comanche band, before he was overwhelmed and probably stabbed to death with lances.

His body was never found.

Josiah Gregg, whose *The Commerce of the Prairies* (1844) is the classic account of the Santa Fe trade, first set out with a trade caravan in May 1831 from Missouri to seek relief for his lifelong frail health. On that journey a Mexican *cibolero* (buffalo hunter) rode up to Gregg's caravan and brought news that a famous *americano* had been killed by Indians in the Cimarron Cutoff, the route to Santa Fe that descended from near present-day Dodge City, Kansas, to the headwater of the Cimarron River, thence across the Cimarron Desert. Later Gregg learned that the *americano* was Jedediah Smith, a man who, Gregg said, "would surely be entitled to one of the most exalted seats in the Olympus of prairie mythology."

Although his name and accomplishments have dimmed, that exalted seat has never been in dispute. A eulogy that appeared in the *Illinois Monthly Magazine* in 1832 described him as "modest, never obtrusive, charitable, and without guile . . . a man whom none could approach without respect or know without esteem." Others spoke in similar terms: Jed Smith was a prototypical Yankee puritan—grim, celibate (his biographer, Dale L. Morgan, points out that Smith was never known to have had an interest in women, least of all in taking an Indian wife or mistress, as so many of his trapping cohorts did), high-minded, and without fear. He was "a bold, outspoken, professing, and consistent Christian," a trapper friend named William Waldo said. A modern historian of the mountain men, Win Blevins, in his book *Give Your Heart to the Hawks* (1973), wrote of Smith's "love of wild places," which "had rooted into him and become a deeper religion." Blevins says Jed Smith's "altar was the mountaintop, his place of meditation not the pew but the wilderness, his sacraments his mountain skills."

No man of his time saw more of the West or filled in more of its blank spaces.

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Cannons at the Pea Ridge National Military Park are representative of artillery used in the battle. They are located on sites occupied by artillery batteries and mark lines of attack and defense.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PEA RIDGE NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

IN THE SCHEME OF CIVIL WAR CARNAGE, the battle of Pea Ridge, fought in the hill country cornfields, swales, scrub timber, and brush thickets of northern Arkansas on March 7 to 8, 1862, may seem a minor affair. True, nearly 26,000 men were engaged there and 3,000 of them ended up as casualties, but the fight pales in comparison, for example, to Shiloh, fought west of the Tennessee River exactly a month later. At Shiloh, U. S. Grant commanded 40,000 men, and his Confederate counterpart, Albert Sidney Johnston, led nearly 43,000. The narrow Federal victory produced 20,000 casualties on both sides—including 3,500 deaths. And six months after Pea Ridge, on September 17, 1862, at Antietam Creek, Maryland, *130,000* men were engaged. Of them, 21,000 became casualties and the number killed at Antietam—the bloodiest single day of the war—equaled the entire casualty list of the Arkansas battle.

And so, in many histories of the war, Pea Ridge—or Elkhorn Tavern, as the Confederates called it—is given a few lines in coverage of the obscure "War in the West" and is scarcely more known in the grand and ghastly scheme of Civil

BY HUGH McCORD

THE CIVIL WAR IN THE WEST

THE BATTLE OF PEA RIDGE

War battles than such other clashes west of the Mississippi as Glorieta Pass in New Mexico Territory or the campaigns in south Texas and Louisiana.

But Pea Ridge had peculiarities and oddities that set it apart from any other battle in the war:

▪In command of the Confederate army was a former governor of Missouri; in command of the Federal troops was a former mayor of Keokuk, Iowa.

▪About a thousand Cherokees and some Creek Indians fought at Pea Ridge, led by a white man who was a scholar in Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit.

▪The two Cherokee leaders, colonels John Drew and Stand Watie, were tribal enemies. The former, a full-blood Cherokee, had opposed relocation of the tribe to Indian Territory, and the latter, of mixed blood, had supported the move.

▪Three Confederate generals died in the battle—one of them a hero of Texas who had fought with Sam Houston at San Jacinto, another whose father had been killed in action in the Mexican War.

▪The grandson of explorer William Clark (of Lewis and Clark) was killed there.

More significant, the battle had the critical distinction of ending any serious

Confederate threat to Missouri and forcing the Southerners to turn their attention to Grant's offensive in Tennessee.

To all who fought in it, all their descendants, and all Arkansans for the past century and a third, Pea Ridge remains a very important matter, indeed.

The prologue to the Battle of Pea Ridge occurred seven months earlier, at a place called Wilson's Creek, near Springfield, Missouri. There, Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon, a veteran of the Seminole and Mexican wars who commanded the arsenal in St. Louis and who had secured that key city for the Union, led a small contingent of volunteers in a mean little four-hour fight. Arrayed against Lyon was a force led by two men whose names were to become associated with Pea Ridge: Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch of Texas, the Confederate commander of Arkansas and the Indian Territory, and Maj. Gen. Sterling "Pap" Price, the prewar governor of Missouri, the state that stood as the key to unlocking the entire trans-Mississippi West. (Price's cavalry commander, Col. Joseph Orville "Jo" Shelby, a wealthy rope manufacturer from Kentucky, had a fighting reputation west of the Mississippi equal to that of Nathan Bedford Forrest in the East.)

The Wilson's Creek fight of August 10, 1861, in which General Lyon was killed, became a sort of Pyrrhic victory for the Confederates. Price moved north and captured the town of Lexington on the Missouri River.

Then, in the face of revived and converging Union forces, he retreated to the southwestern corner of the state while McCulloch led his volunteers into northwestern Arkansas.

The prologue to Pea Ridge occurred seven months earlier at Wilson's Creek, near Springfield, Missouri.

Maj. Gen. Sterling "Pap" Price, the prewar governor of Missouri (above) and Union Brig. Gen. Samual Ryan Curtis, former mayor of Keokuk, Iowa.

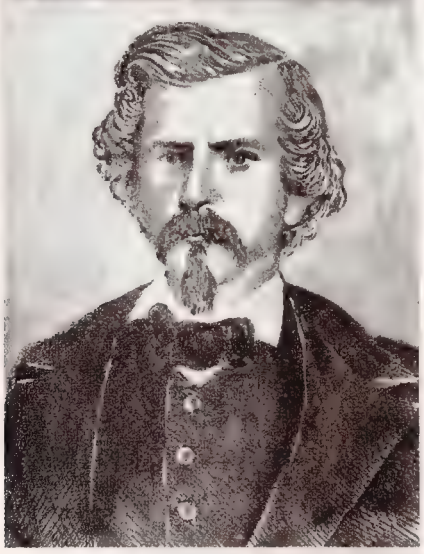
In truth, Sterling Price and Ben McCulloch had little use for each other. Price, a fifty-two-year-old Virginian and Mexican War veteran, had a record as a politician—military governor of New Mexico Territory, prewar governor of Missouri—and McCulloch regarded the hefty, silver-haired commander of the 7,000-man Missouri State Guard as an amateur warrior leading a "huckleberry cavalry." Price was equally unimpressed with the brash McCulloch, despite the fifty-year-old Texan's extraordinary career as a soldier (San Jacinto under Gen. Sam Houston, Mexico with Gen. Zachary Taylor), Texas Ranger, and U.S. Marshal. Price considered McCulloch—who disdained uniforms and wore a black velvet suit into battle—as too uncommitted to preserving Missouri for the Confederacy.

In late December of 1861, events that were to culminate at Pea Ridge opened with the appointment of a new commander of the Union Army of the Southwest. Brig. Gen. Samuel Ryan Curtis, a ramrod-straight fifty-six-year-old New Yorker, West Point graduate, engineer, lawyer, congressman, and former mayor of Keokuk, Iowa, came to his new assignment with specific orders to drive Sterling Price and all Confederates out of Missouri. With something under 11,000 men and fifty cannons in his army, he launched his campaign to secure Missouri and the entire Mississippi River on Christmas Day, 1861. By February 11, moving southwestward from Lebanon, Missouri, Curtis had succeeded in pushing Price's outnumbered and outgunned force into the Beaver Lake district of northwest Arkansas, then halted forty miles north of the Pea Ridge hills and set up a defensive camp to guard the Missouri border. One of Curtis's divisional commanders, Brig.

PHOTOS [THIS PAGE]: STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI, COLUMBIA. PHOTO [OPPOSITE] COURTESY OF PEA RIDGE NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

VAN DORN'S PLAN TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY WAS DARING, INNOVATIVE, AND WELL-LAID BUT, AS ALL SUCH PLANS SEEM DESTINED, IT SOON WENT AWRY.

The Ellyson Tavern is open to the public from May to October. It was burned to the ground by Confederate guerrillas about a year after the battle and has been reconstructed.



PORTRAITS: STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI, COLUMBIA.

Confederate Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch (top); Confederate Maj.Gen. Earl Van Dorn (middle); Confederate Brig. Gen. Alfred Pike (bottom); and Union Brig. Gen. Franz Sigel.

ON A RIDGE ABOVE THE TAVERN, PRICE'S INFANTRY MADE A GALLANT LAST STAND BEFORE FALTERING UNDER SIGEL'S GUNS AND BAYONETS.

Gen. Franz Sigel, a veteran of the German army, took a force of Union troops and occupied the Arkansas town of Bentonville, southwest of a low ridge of hills blanketed with pea vines.

In the meantime Price, his 7,000-man army camped in the Boston Mountains south of Fayetteville, fifty miles from his Union counterpart, received vital reinforcements. His old rival, Ben McCulloch, arrived with 8,000 Arkansas and Indian Territory volunteers, about a thousand Cherokees, and a few Creek Indians. The Cherokees, wearing feathers, turbans, calico shirts, buckskins, and moccasins, and armed with bows, arrows, and war clubs, in addition to rifles and shotguns, were commanded by the hugely imposing Brig. Gen. Alfred Pike. He was a fifty-two-year-old Boston-born Arkansas landowner, a three-hundred-pound eccentric with a wild mane of hair and a chest-length beard who wrote poetry, studied Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and the Cherokee languages.

On March 3, the Confederates gathered in the Boston Mountain foothills received a new commanding general for their combined forces, now called the Army of the West. This was Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, forty-one, a dapper, impatient Mississippian and West Pointer, lately commander of the Department of Texas. In conferring with Price and McCulloch, Van Dorn grandly announced his intention of fulfilling President Jefferson Davis's wish to crush Curtis and the Federals forthwith and conquer Missouri once and for all. On the eve of his march north he wrote his wife, "I must have St. Louis—then huzza!"

On March 4, in a blinding late-winter blizzard, Van Dorn marched his army toward Bentonville, the town held by two divisions under Franz Sigel and made up largely of German immigrant volunteers from the St. Louis area. Federal scouts reported Van Dorn's approach and Samuel Curtis consolidated his 12,000 Federals along Telegraph Road, which connected Springfield, Missouri, and Fayetteville, Arkansas, and crossed his army over Little Sugar Creek, a few miles south of the Pea Ridge foothills and the nearby hostelry called Elkhorn Tavern. There, in a naturally fortified position, the Union soldiers entrenched, building an earth-and-timber breastwork with the

creek to their front, their rear guarded by the steep Pea Ridge escarpments.

With Price's Missourians in the vanguard, Van Dorn marched his two divisions rapidly and on March 6 caught a small rear guard of Sigel's Federals as it retreated from Bentonville to rejoin the main Union force below Pea Ridge, producing minor casualties on both sides. Van Dorn's army of 16,000 approached the vicinity of Little Sugar Creek that evening and bivouacked for the night.

As the cooking fires of the weary Confederates sparked and popped in the frosty twilight, Van Dorn, meeting with Price, McCulloch, Pike, and various staff officers, formulated his plan to engage the enemy. Clearly, a frontal attack on the Union entrenchments was out of the question, but a bold and unexpected move, he said, would win the day. Van Dorn announced that he intended to envelop the Yankees by moving Price's Missourians—half of his army—to the Union rear in an eight-mile night march around Pea Ridge, and at dawn advance south past Elkhorn Tavern and take the Federals by surprise. Under Van Dorn's imaginative plan, while Price was leading his men around Pea Ridge, McCulloch and Pike would take the other half of the Confederate force on a shorter march around the west end of the ridge and move southeast through the settlement of Leetown. When Van Dorn began his attack on the front of Curtis's entrenchments, they would hit the right rear of the Union line, putting the Federals in the jaws of a vise.

It was a daring, innovative, and well-laid plan, and one that, as all such plans seem destined, soon went awry. Price's division trudged out of camp on the night of March 6–7 and moved along the road known as the Bentonville Detour, passing around the right flank of the Union position. They reached the Telegraph Road and, by midmorning, turned south toward Elkhorn Tavern. But McCulloch's troops lagged far behind—so far behind that Van Dorn ordered McCulloch to leave the Bentonville road and engage the Federals several miles to the west of Price's division. This dividing of the Confederate advance critically affected Van Dorn's plan and scattered his offensive into separate engagements rather than one devastating surprise strike.

In any event, the Union commander, Samuel Curtis, had his own daring decision to make. He learned of Van Dorn's movements on the morning of March 7 and, in a brilliant maneuver, ordered his men out of their fortified positions on Little Sugar Creek and turned them toward their rear, facing north instead of south. Curtis, with his Federals now on the offensive, quickly launched an attack on Sterling Price's force by sending the energetic Col. Eugene Asa Carr, a veteran Indian fighter, with a brigade of the Fourth Division north toward Telegraph Road. At the same time, Curtis sent one of Sigel's divisional commanders, German-born Col. Peter J. Osterhaus, west

Volunteers at the park stage living history reenactment programs and discuss weapons and equipment with visitors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PEA RIDGE NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

VISITING THE BATTLEFIELD

Pea Ridge National Military Park is near Pea Ridge, Arkansas, twenty-eight miles north of Fayetteville. The battlefield covers 4,300 acres within the park. The Visitor's Center has exhibits and brochures, and a road loops around the park taking visitors to twelve numbered sites, including Curtis's Union headquarters, locations of Federal and Confederate artillery, Elkhorn Tavern, the Leetown Battlefield, and the site of the Cherokee volunteers' position at the opening of the battle.

TO GET THERE

Take U.S. 62 from Fayetteville to Rogers, then go ten miles north off U.S. 62 to the Pea Ridge National Military Park.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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past Leetown with a detachment of cavalry, infantry, and cannons to engage the Confederates along the Bentonville Detour.

The fighting began a mile north of Leetown, on the western edge of Pea Ridge, at about 10:30 A.M., when McCulloch's division clashed with a battery of Osterhaus's artillerymen, who fired on the Confederates from a cleared portion of a farm field.

The Leetown fighting, in trampled cornfields and mushy swales of farmlands, in belts of brush and scrub timber and along split-rail fences, seemed at first to favor the Confederates. McCulloch's Texas and Arkansas infantry, led by Col. Louis Hébert of Louisiana, and his cavalry, under Brig. Gen. James McQueen McIntosh of Florida, pushed the Federals back toward Leetown early in the fight. But all this changed radically about noon on the seventh, when Osterhaus's Federals were joined by the Union Third Division, led by Col. Jefferson C. Davis, a Mexican War veteran from Indiana. Davis's infantry struck McCulloch's left flank, and in the fierce clash, Ben McCulloch was killed by a rifle volley. A few minutes later, McIntosh, whose father had died in action at Molina del Rey in the Mexican War, fell, shot through the heart.

The Confederate advance disintegrated after the death of the generals, and Hébert's brigade of infantry—outflanked, hungry, and exhausted—fled toward the Bentonville road. Hébert and many of his men were captured by the Federals.

Franz Sigel soon arrived at Leetown with heavy reinforcements, secured the battlefield, and marched east to join the ongoing fight around Elkhorn Tavern.

On the southeastern foothills of Pea Ridge, most notably around the whitewashed wooden frame building known as Elkhorn Tavern, Earl Van Dorn, at the head

THE CONFEDERATES WERE IN POOR CONDITION TO FIGHT. THEY WERE BONE-TIRED AND STARVING, AND AMMUNITION HAD RUN LOW.

of Sterling Price's division, was having better luck despite growing obstacles—some of his own making. He had early lost the element of surprise that was central to his bold plan to encircle the Federals; he had no central command post and therefore had scant knowledge of the fighting in the Leetown area; and now his Confederates, located in the bottom of a ravine called Cross Timber Hollow, faced Union troops occupying a splendid position on the Pea Ridge plateau. Under the fearful hammering of the Union artillery fire, Price's men ascended the plateau and, in fierce fighting, pushed back the force headed by Col. Eugene Carr of the Third Illinois Cavalry, gaining a foothold on the Pea Ridge heights.

In the fight, in which Carr's soldiers fell back nearly a mile, the third Confederate general was killed. This was Brig. Gen. William Yarnell Slack of Kentucky, who had fought in Mexico with Sterling Price in 1846. In command of Price's left wing, Slack's men captured a Federal cannon on the Pea Ridge heights, but Slack was mortally wounded in the clash and died on March 21.

Price, too, in this part of the battle, was twice wounded—in the abdomen and right arm—but had his wounds dressed and continued to command his division.

By nightfall, the Van Dorn–Price advance was halted as the Federals brought reinforcements up from Little Sugar Creek. During the night of March 7–8, Curtis concentrated his Federals along the Telegraph Road and its juncture at Elkhorn Tavern; Van Dorn ordered the remnants of McCulloch's division to that area as well.

The Confederate commander now faced the greatest of his several dilemmas since the battle had begun. An uncomfortably large percentage of his consolidated Army of the West was in poor condition to fight. McCulloch's contingent, especially, was bone-tired and starving, reduced to eating what scraps of food they could find in the knapsacks of the Union dead or what meager edibles they could forage in the winter-dead farmland. Moreover, ammunition was running low and the supply wagons—through what Van Dorn later called "a strange and criminal mistake"—had fallen far behind in the march around Pea Ridge.

By the time dawn broke at his back on March 8, Van Dorn formed his men into a defensive line in front of Elkhorn Tavern that bent toward the south. Commanding a brigade on the right of the line stood one of Sterling Price's favorites, Col. Lewis Henry Little of Maryland, an artilleryman who had distinguished himself at Monterey in the Mexican War. Price himself commanded the center with McCulloch's depleted division, now commanded by Col. Elkanah Greer of Tennessee, on the left.

Curtis's gunners laid down a ferocious cannon barrage at sunrise, and when it dwindled after disabling many of the Confederate guns, the Union general deployed his army—four divisions in

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numerical order from left to right, two on each side of the Telegraph Road—against Van Dorn's army, which was spread out at the base of Pea Ridge. Franz Sigel directed the First and Second Divisions on the Union left; Curtis the Third and Fourth on the right. In two hours Sigel's great line of bayonets, cavalry at the flanks, advanced relentlessly across the low farmland hills, the Federal artillery pounding gaps in the Confederate line. (One of Van Dorn's artillery officers, Capt. Churchill Clark, a nineteen-year-old grandson of explorer William Clark, was decapitated by a Union cannonball.)

Sigel's brutal artillery, more than any other factor, caused the right of the Confederate line to waver and fall back. Answering cannon fire from in front of Elkhorn Tavern was desultory at best—Van Dorn's ordnance train was still far separated from the fight and ammunition and powder were at a premium from the opening of the Union advance. Curtis, seeing the Confederate right disintegrating into a rout, coolly ordered Sigel and his own divisions to turn to the left of the enemy line. The Federals then regrouped and ran up the Telegraph Road toward Elkhorn Tavern.

On a ridge above the tavern, Price's infantry made a gallant last stand before faltering under Sigel's guns and bayonets, and while Sterling Price, his arm in a bloody sling, rode up and down the line shouting to rally his Missourians, the Confederates, with no cannon to slow the Union advance, scattered and Van Dorn was forced to order a retreat.

As the Confederates fled north and west back toward the route they had taken in advancing on Pea Ridge, Samuel Curtis rode up along the front of Elkhorn Tavern shouting "Victory! Victory!" with no denying voice to be heard.

Price and Van Dorn regrouped

After the War

Samuel R. Curtis served as a government commissioner negotiating among the Plains Indians. He died in Iowa in 1866.

Earl Van Dorn, impetuous to the end, did not survive the war. On May 7, 1863, he was shot and killed in Spring Hill, Tennessee, over an alleged affair with a married woman.

Sterling Price went to Mexico to volunteer for service under Emperor Maximilian. He died in St. Louis in 1867.

Albert Pike devoted his postwar life to Masonic affairs and writing legal papers, and died in Washington, D.C., in 1891.

Stand Watie resumed his life as a planter and businessman and died in Oklahoma in 1871.

John Drew died poor in Oklahoma in 1865.

Jefferson C. Davis, provoked in a quarrel with another Union general, William Nelson, shot Nelson dead in a hotel lobby in Louisville, Kentucky, in September 1862. He was restored to duty and served as a divisional commander at Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, and the Atlanta campaign. He died in Chicago in 1879.

Eugene A. Carr, wounded three times at Pea Ridge, returned to the western frontier, left the army as a brigadier general in 1892, and in 1894 was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his valor in the Arkansas battle. He died in Washington, D.C., in 1910.

Franz Sigel ran for various offices and served as a pension agent during the Cleveland presidency. He died in New York in 1902.

Peter J. Osterhaus later fought at Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Missionary Ridge, ending the war a major general. He served as U.S. Consul in Lyons, France, and died in Germany in 1917 at the age of ninety-four.

Louis Hébert fought at Corinth and Vicksburg and after the war edited a newspaper and taught school. He died in Louisiana in 1901.

Elkanah Greer, planter and merchant, died in Arkansas in 1877.

Henry L. Little survived Pea Ridge by six months. Promoted to brigadier general after the Arkansas campaign, he fought again with Van Dorn, Price, and Hébert at Iuka, in northern Mississippi, against Union troops led by Gen. William S. Rosecrans. During the fight, on September 19, 1862, as he sat his horse in conversation with Price, Hébert, and another officer, a rifle shot from the Federal lines struck him in the forehead, killing him instantly.

several days later in Van Buren, nearly a hundred miles to the southeast. By then a good part of the Army of the West had disappeared—the volunteers deserting their units and heading home. Alfred Pike, convinced that Van Dorn's army was destroyed, led his small force of Cherokees back into Indian Territory.

Several days were to pass before the Federal commander learned the whereabouts of Van Dorn, Price, and what remained of their bedraggled and starving army. Curtis elected not to pursue them.

The casualties of the Pea Ridge battle—2,684 men killed and wounded—were more or less balanced. The Confederates began the campaign with about 16,000 men—although fewer than 15,000 were engaged at Pea Ridge—and ended it with about 1,600 casualties. The Union force in the battle numbered about 10,500 men and Union casualties numbered 1,384.

Earl Van Dorn could not admit that he lost the battle of Pea Ridge. "I was not defeated," he said vehemently, "but only foiled in my intentions." His superiors did not subscribe to his theory, however, and he was ordered to abandon his dream of conquering St. Louis for the Confederacy and to take the remnant of his army south, to help stem the Union offensive in Tennessee.

The victor, Gen. Samuel Curtis, wrote to his wife after the battle, "The vulture and the wolf have now communion and the dead, friends and foes, sleep in the same lonely grave."

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A CONVERSATION WITH

BILL PRONZINI

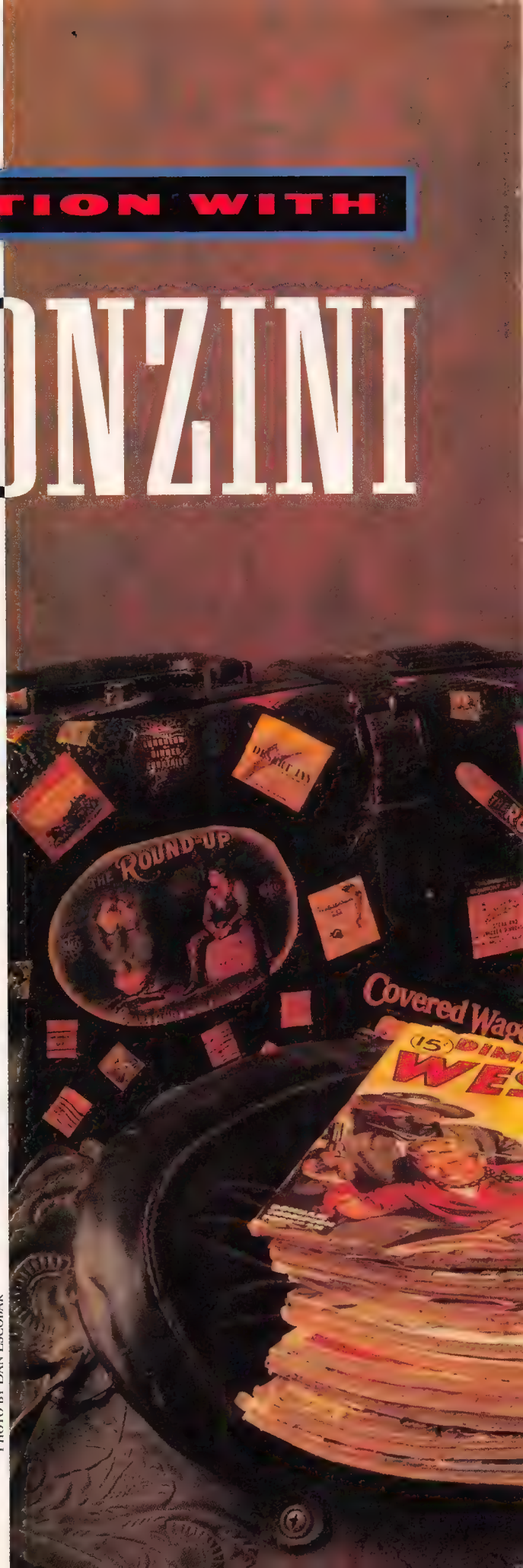

PHOTO BY DAN ESCOBAR

He has written twenty-two novels and one short story collection about a nameless San Francisco detective, but Bill Pronzini himself has many names. He has written novels and stories as William Jeffrey, Alex Saxon, Jack Foxx, Rick Renault, J. V. Drexel, and Russell Dancer. He has written a Mike Shayne detective novel under the Brett Halliday house name and numerous western stories under the name Romer Zane Grey. He has also written a Charlie Chan novel and a "Man from U.N.C.L.E." novel, and has published stories under his own name in periodicals as varied as *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Analog Science Fiction and Fact, Cosmopolitan,* and *Boy's Life.*

His own full name is William John Pronzini and he has produced an astonishing fifty novels, four nonfiction books, and over three hundred stories, articles, and reviews in twenty-nine years. He has been a full-time freelance writer since 1969.

Pronzini, who was born in 1943, spent the first twenty-two years of his life in Petaluma,

BY

DALE L. WALKER

"QUINCANNON IS NOT BASED ON A HISTORICAL FIGURE, BUT THE SECRET SERVICE AND THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP ARE AUTHENTIC."

California, which is forty miles north of San Francisco in Sonoma County. The town, founded in 1858, was known as a chicken, egg, and dairy product farming center and had a population of about twelve thousand when the author was growing up, but is now a forty thousand resident "bedroom" community for Bay Area commuters. Actor Lloyd Bridges went to school there. Character actor Myron Healey was born there, as well as the poet Arthur Winfield Knight. "Petaluma's next most famous native-son writer is probably me," Pronzini says, "which ought to tell you something about the town's literary heritage." (Pronzini's modesty may be placed alongside a *Dallas Morning News* review of his latest novel, *With an Extreme Burning,* which contains the statement that "if not the father of contemporary detective fiction, [Pronzini] is at least an honored uncle.")

He has traveled extensively in Europe and lived in Majorca and West Germany in 1970 through 1973.

Until he began writing professionally, he attended junior college and worked as a newsstand clerk, sports reporter, warehouseman, salesman, and a civilian guard in a U.S. Marshal's office. In 1966, a breakthrough event sealed Pronzini's future: He sold a story, "a shameless Hemingway pastiche," he says, titled "You Don't Know What It's Like," to *Shell Scott Mystery Magazine,* a digest-sized New York monthly named for the then-popular detective creation of Richard Prather. Soon after, his stories began appearing in *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine,* and later in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* and other popular periodicals.

His first novel, a mystery titled *The Stalker,* appeared in 1971, as well as his first "Nameless Detective" novel, *The Snatch.*

At a young age Pronzini had read and admired such western writers as Jack Schaefer, Dorothy Johnson, A. B. Guthrie, Ernest Haycox, Frank O'Rourke, Luke Short, Norman Fox, and Will Henry. His first opportunity to write and sell a western story occurred in 1969. In that year, Leo Margulies, whom Pronzini describes as "the grand old man of the pulps," invited him and another young freelancer, Jeff Wallmann, to contribute stories to *Zane Grey Western Magazine* and to write lead novellas for the magazine under the house name Romer Zane Grey.

After boning up on Grey's work, the first Pronzini-Wallmann collaboration to *ZGWM* was "Danger Rides the Dollar Wagon" in the March 1970 issue. In all Pronzini wrote twenty stories for the magazine, six of them in collaboration with Wallmann under the Romer Zane Grey pen name. "Those and other early efforts were pretty awful," Pronzini says. "With a couple of minor exceptions, I didn't write a decent piece of western fiction until the early nineteen eighties."

His first western novel, *The Gallows Land,* appeared in 1984 and was followed by *Starvation Camp* (which he describes as a "northern," since it is set in the Yukon Territory in the gold rush era of 1898), *Quincannon* (1985), *Beyond the Grave* (with Marcia Muller, 1986), *The Last Days of Horse-Shy Halloran* (1987), *The Hangings* (1989), and *Firewind* (1989). His *Best Western Stories of Bill Pronzini* was published in 1990, and his newest western novel, set in modern-day Nevada, *Blue Lonesome,* will be published in November 1995 by Walker Books. English critic David Whitehead describes Pronzini's western stories as "distinguished by a neat sense of pace and regular, although seldom graphic, bursts of action. While they are usually traditional enough to satisfy even the most ardent purist, they rarely adhere to convention or expectation for very long."

Pronzini describes his western novels and stories as "quirky rather than strictly traditional tales. Most of them are also mystery and detective stories to one degree or another."

Pronzini answered *LLWM*'s questions from his home in Petaluma, where he lives with his wife, mystery novelist Marcia Muller.

LLWM: Your Quincannon stories in this magazine are very popular. They are, I take it, out-

"I'VE ALWAYS ENJOYED COLLABORATING WITH OTHERS. IT'S EASIER FOR TWO HEADS TO WORK OUT A COMPLICATED PLOT THAN IT IS FOR ONE."

growths of the *Quincannon* novel. Is John Quincannon based on any real historic person?

PRONZINI: In the book, Quincannon is still with the San Francisco branch of the U.S. Secret Service and is on the trail of a counterfeiting ring. He's not based on a historical figure, but the Secret Service and the historical backdrop are authentic. In the novel he's also a serious alcoholic, as the result of an accidental shooting in which a pregnant woman was killed. He blames himself for her death and the death of her child. By the final chapter, though, he has come to terms with the shooting and his drinking problem.

LLWM: Did Sabina Carpenter have something to do with his getting a grip?

PRONZINI: Yes. He meets her in Silver City, Idaho, home base of the counterfeiters. She's a Pinkerton operative based in Denver, working undercover. Sabina *is* loosely based on a real person: Kate Warne, the first female private operative, who worked for Allan Pinkerton in his Baltimore agency.

LLWM: The sequel to *Quincannon,* titled *Beyond the Grave,* was written in collaboration with your wife, Marcia Muller. How did that come about?

PRONZINI: Marcia and I collaborated on a novel, *Double,* involving one of her detective series characters, Sharon McCone, and my "Nameless" detective, and we thought it would be fun to work together again on another project. We got to wondering if there was a way to do one in which her other series character, Elena Oliverez, a Chicana museum curator, could possibly team up with an 1890s detective like Quincannon. We came up with a story that begins in the 1846 Bear Flag Rebellion in California and involves some missing religious artifacts. Quincannon comes into the case in 1894 and solves part of the mystery but is unable to locate the missing artifacts. Then, in the present day, Elena Oliverez discovers a folder containing Quincannon's investigator's report and embarks on a piece of historical detective work that soon escalates into a full-scale hunt—one involving some mayhem—for the artifacts.

LLWM: How did you handle the collaboration?

PRONZINI: Once we had the plot worked out, we told the story in alternating sections, beginning in 1846 and then shifting back and forth between Quincannon in 1894 and Elena Oliverez in the present.

LLWM: Marcia is an established mystery writer—what is it like for each of you living with a professional writer?

PRONZINI: It has a lot more positives than negatives. Marcia and I have the same general approach to our craft and our minds work along similar lines, so we're able to help each other unsnarl problems with plot, structure, and character development. We also function as each other's in-house editor, reading works in progress and noting errors, suggesting revisions, and so on.

LLWM: What is a typical workday like for the two of you?

PRONZINI: We have about the same work schedule: three hours or so in the mornings, afternoons off for outings or errands, another three hours or so in the late afternoon and early evening—five and sometimes six days a week. Another thing that works in our relationship: There's no professional jealousy.

LLWM: You seem to have collaborated successfully with others, too—Jeff Wallmann, Barry Malzberg, Martin H. Greenberg, and even the political columnist Jack Anderson.

PRONZINI: With the exception of the mainstream novel I did with Jack Anderson, a monumental headache from start to finish, I've always enjoyed collaborating. For one thing, it eases the loneliness of the long-distance writer. For another, it's easier for two heads to work out a complicated plot than it is for one. And a third

"OWN ABOUT THREE THOUSAND PULP MAGAZINES OF ALL TYPES—MYSTERY-DETECTIVE AND WESTERNS, PRIMARILY."

reason is that collaborating allows two writers to create a third voice—a blending of styles and visions of each to create a composite that is different from each alone.

LLWM: You and Martin Greenberg have collaborated on editing a *lot* of anthologies, including over thirty collections of western fiction. Is this sort of a sideline for you, in between your novels and stories?

PRONZINI: Pretty much a sideline, yes. I do them because for me they're relatively easy to compile, since I have such a large collection of magazines and other sources of short stories. Also, I enjoy shepherding good stories, particularly those by unknown writers, back into print. The money is adequate for doing them and a professional these days needs to utilize every source of income he can.

LLWM: Do you have a card index or something on all the stories you have read? How do you and Marty Greenberg make your selections?

PRONZINI: No, no card index. I have a fairly active memory and I love to plow through old books and magazines. I'd have made a good archivist. The reprint anthologies I've edited or coedited are all "theme" books—*The Lawmen, The Gunfighters, The Californians,* and so on. What I usually do is search out a batch of stories on a particular theme and then pick the ones I think are the best written and the most interesting variations. The process is purely arbitrary. An anthologist has to trust his own judgment.

LLWM: Some of the sources of those old stories are pulp magazines and I know you love the old pulps. Your "Nameless" detective collects them and you have written affectionately about them. What is there about the old pulps that attracts you?

PRONZINI: They're representative of an era that has considerable appeal for me. I was probably born a generation too late; I'd have been right at home as a writer in the nineteen thirties and forties and I expect I'd have been happy as a pulp fictioneer. The other reason I like the pulps is that buried among millions of words of mediocre and often very bad formula fiction are some really excellent stories by writers who went on to make names for themselves in the book markets. And there are good stories by pulpsters who labored in obscurity and who never got their due. I enjoy the hunt for those stories.

LLWM: You and "Nameless" have pulp collections?

PRONZINI: I own about three thousand pulps of all types—mystery-detective and westerns, primarily. That's about half the total owned by "Nameless." I also have another seventeen to twenty thousand digest and slick magazines, hardcover and paperback novels of all types, and nonfiction books collected and accumulated over the past twenty-five-plus years. If I wasn't making a living as a writer, I'd probably become a dealer in rare and secondhand books.

LLWM: Your two book-length "tributes" to the worst of pulp detective-story prose, *Gun in Cheek* and *Son of Gun in Cheek*. . . .

PRONZINI: Actually those books are about novels and films, as well as pulps. They do single out the "worst." That is, the most ridiculous, and therefore most quotable, plots and passages of dialogue and narrative—what I call "alternative classics"—culled from all facets of the detective and mystery genre. Both books were billed as "affectionate" guides, which is important.

LLWM: You used a couple of examples from your own work, too. I especially loved that line from your first novel, *The Stalker:* "When would this phantasmagoria that was all too real reality end? he asked himself."

PRONZINI: Whew, that stinks. I quoted a couple of my own published howlers to reinforce the fact that there was no malice aforethought in those books. My sole purpose in playing this kind of Bulwer-Lytton game

"In *Shackles*, the protagonist is forced to live as a trapped animal, alone, with little hope for survival, and yet manages to survive."

was to amuse and entertain, to gently point out how even the best writers are sometimes guilty of farcical prose. Even so, some writers and critics took offense. Too many people take things too damn seriously these days.

LLWM: We've talked in the past about a similar treatment of bad western prose, *Sixgun in Cheek*. Is there any news on this?

PRONZINI: There is in fact going to be a *Sixgun in Cheek*. I'm working on it now, and by the time this interview appears, it might be in print. I'd originally intended to write it about six years ago, but the publisher I had lined up reneged on a verbal commitment and I had to shelve it.

LLWM: How was it resurrected?

PRONZINI: Bruce Taylor and Steve Stilwell, a couple of mystery bookstore owners who started a small press in nineteen ninety-one, have been nagging me to do *Sixgun* and finally came up with enough cash to make it worth my while. They're planning a seven hundred fifty-copy trade paperback edition and a two hundred fifty-copy signed limited edition, both under their Crossover Press imprint. I'm having a lot of fun with it.

LLWM: Your first western story appeared in *Zane Grey Western Magazine* in 1969—the same year you began writing full-time. What turned you toward writing westerns?

PRONZINI: My first western story was "Sawtooth Justice," in the second issue of *Zane Grey*. Pure mediocre pulp, made worse by heavy and poor blue-penciling by the editor. What set me to writing westerns was Leo Margulies, when he decided to launch *ZGWM* in early nineteen sixty-nine. He asked Jeff Wallmann and me if we'd like to contribute stories and collaborate on some Romer Zane Grey novellas based on characters created by Zane Grey. We were eager beginners and we'd have said yes to anything at that point. Our first collaboration, "Danger Rides the Dollar Wagon," was pretty awful. So is the expanded and revised novel-length version, *Duel at Gold Buttes,* which was published by Leisure under the William Jeffrey byline in nineteen eighty-one. A later novella for *ZGWM,* "The Raid at Three Rapids," which was originally titled "Ghost Killers of Superstition Cemetery," is so terrible I've singled it out for dissection in *Sixgun in Cheek*.

LLWM: That title alone would merit inclusion. If you had to choose, which do you like best, the short or long form of fiction?

PRONZINI: I prefer short stories. Ideas are easier to come by, they're fairly simple to plot now that I've published well over two hundred, and best of all, the creative process from conception to completion is relatively brief. Novels require a lot more work and a lot more patience, and patience has never been one of my virtues. The best works of fiction I've written, I think, are short stories. Still, I would rather write a really first-rate novel than a really first-rate short story. Greater difficulty, greater satisfaction.

LLWM: What novel would you single out as a first-rate Pronzini?

PRONZINI: I don't feel that I've written a really first-rate novel yet and I suspect I never will. *Shackles* probably comes closest, with the fewest flaws of any of my novels. The forthcoming *Blue Lonesome* is next in line; it's the first novel since *Shackles* in which I pretty much accomplished everything I set out to do.

LLWM: I'd also single out *Shackles*. For all but the last few pages of this book, your "Nameless" detective is alone, chained up inside a remote cabin in the Sierras. This had to be a tough book to write.

PRONZINI: It was conceived because I wanted to do something completely different in a private eye story—a book in which the protagonist is forced to live as a trapped animal, alone, with little hope for survival, and yet who manages to survive against seemingly insurmountable odds. I

"ENJOY TRYING TO CAPTURE ON PAPER SOME SENSE OF THE LIFE AND TIMES IN CALIFORNIA, NEVADA, AND MONTANA A HUNDRED YEARS AGO."

wanted to write a psychological suspense novel as well as a whodunit and a whydunit, in which I could explore in depth the various effects the ordeal has on him. I also wanted to see if I could pull off what is essentially a one-character novel. And finally, I wanted to do a detective novel in which nobody actually dies, yet with the *threat* of death permeating the narrative. It *was* very difficult to write; it took me twice as long as any other "Nameless"—nearly a year. I lived every minute of the ordeal with him.

LLWM: This is a western magazine and I need to get back to western matters, but I have to ask one more question about "Nameless." (My theory is that he is the grandson of Quincannon, which makes him a western matter.) There are—what, twenty novels in this series? Why did you decide not to reveal his name?

PRONZINI: I like that grandson theory. "Nameless" didn't start out to be nameless, nor did I have any intention of doing a series character who could be billed as such. When I wrote the first short story about him in nineteen sixty-seven I couldn't think of a name that suited him or me, so he remained anonymous through several more stories and the writing of *The Snatch*. My editor at that time said that Nameless really should be named in the novel, so I put the problem in her hands: If *she* could think of a suitable handle that satisfied both of us, that's who he would be. But she couldn't and she was the one, in a subsequent novel, who christened him the "Nameless Detective." There are twenty-two novels in the series and one collection of shorts, called *Casefile*.

LLWM: Turns out I had *two* more questions: *Hardcase* is the most recent "Nameless." What is his future?

PRONZINI: *Hardcase* may well be the last. Delacorte has dropped the series, despite reasonably strong hardcover sales, and I have been unable to find another publisher. The publishing consensus seems to be that a fiftyish, overweight, male, non-superhero private eye whose cases tend to be small and personalized rather than the "high concept" stuff of bestsellers, is too old-fashioned and passé. I'd like to think the mavens are wrong. I *hope* they're wrong. If they're not, it's probably time for me to retire, too.

LLWM: They're wrong. A few questions about western fiction in general: Why do you write westerns?

PRONZINI: I like 'em. Reading, collecting, writing about them, and creating my own—all enjoyable pursuits. I enjoy the research, too, and the challenge of trying to capture on paper some sense of the life and times in California, Nevada, and Montana a hundred years ago.

LLWM: What is your assessment of the western story and novel today as contrasted, say, with the pulp era?

PRONZINI: Today's western fiction is far superior. There were very good writers in the field pre-nineteen forty, but even Wister and Grey and Haycox were limited in what they could write about and how they could write it. It wasn't until the post-war forties, and particularly, the fifties—western fiction's renaissance decade—that it began to emerge from the formula ghetto that publishers had locked it into.

LLWM: What western writers from the renaissance era, and today, do you like?

PRONZINI: A couple of dozen quality writers came into the field during the fifties, and quite a few old-timers took advantage of the opportunity to elevate the quality of their work. I'm a big fan of A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Jack Schaefer, and Dorothy Johnson. They did as much as anyone to make the general reader realize that western fiction can not only be high-quality popular entertainment but literature as well. Elmer Kelton, Larry McMurtry, Max Evans, Robert Flynn, William Decker, Will Henry . . . they're just a few who subsequently reached and in some cases surpassed those mas-

"THE WESTERN FUNCTIONS AS A SYMBOL OF ALL THAT THIS COUNTRY STANDS FOR: FREEDOM, JUSTICE, SELF-RELIANCE, THE PIONEER SPIRIT."

ters. And there are people writing today—Jane Coleman is one—who may well take the western yet another notch higher.

LLWM: Counting the dime-novel era, the western story has a history of close to one hundred fifty years. How do you account for its durability?

PRONZINI: It's a uniquely American art form. It functions as a symbol of all that this country stands for: freedom, justice, self-reliance, the pioneer spirit. In a **century that has produced two** world wars, dozens of localized wars and "police actions," the Great Depression and all sorts of other disasters, Americans have needed—still need—some of that spirit to sustain them.

LLWM: All those things, and yet it is a misunderstood form.

PRONZINI: One thing that drives me crazy is people who sneer at westerns as mindless horse opera—usually people who have never read one and know **nothing about western** fiction or western history. If they'd keep an open mind they'd realize that good westerns have as much entertainment and literary value as any other type of fiction and also provide something that is sorely lacking in today's society—a true sense of history. And not just of the Old West. Of the twentieth century, too. It seems to me that if you examined a cross-section of western novels published during each decade of this century, they would not only tell you what type of stories were read and who

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wrote them, but also provide details on moral, religious, and political attitudes, passions and prejudices, fads and fancies. Mini–social histories of each decade, in fact, through which you could accurately assess the progression and fundamental changes that have taken place in American society.

LLWM: Your own westerns seem to have a different edge. You do not hesitate to write humorously, or offbeat, or, in such a novel as *The Hangings,* combine a mystery with a western or, as in *Starvation Camp,* set a story in the Yukon and have a Canadian Mountie as a protagonist.

PRONZINI: I like to try as many different kinds of writing as I feel comfortable with, partly for the challenge and partly because I think it helps me grow, stretch, become a better writer. So, yes, I make a conscious effort to diversify my western fiction. Many of the stories I do are also mysteries or have strong mystery elements because first and foremost I'm a mystery writer. But I've also perpetrated action westerns, psychological westerns, funny westerns, offbeat westerns, and the northern-western, *Starvation Camp.* (That novel, incidentally, came about because I grew up listening to the old radio program "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon," and always wanted to try my hand at a Mountie story.)

LLWM: Another feature of your western work, and your other work as well, is that there is not a lot of gunplay or graphic violence in the stories.

PRONZINI: I don't believe in gratuitous or overly explicit violence. I'm old-fashioned in that respect: I consider myself primarily an entertainer and I don't see much entertainment value in lavish descriptions of the ravages one human being can inflict on another. I prefer to let the reader use his or her imagination wherever possible. Also, I'm a firm believer in the theory that the *threat* of violence, properly presented, is much more compelling and absorbing than violence itself.

LLWM: What do you find in the modern western story that you like? Dislike?

PRONZINI: I like the complete freedom of expression—no restrictions in style, subject matter, character, or any other aspect. That's the central reason why today's westerns are so good. I dislike excesses of all kinds and I'm also leery of the attitude among some western writers that in order for a story to be of any value, it must not only be historically accurate in every minute detail but be filled with as many of those details as it is possible to cram in. Whatever happened to the benign use of poetic license? I believe in research and in portraying historical periods and characters as accurately as possible, but no matter how much research any of us does, there is no way we can get every detail right. Hell, trained historians can't even agree on some of the larger issues of western history.

LLWM: Do you have a western novel in the works? Can we expect some more Quincannon stories?

PRONZINI: I'd like to do another Quincannon-Sabina novel and I have feelers out now. I'd also like to write another traditional western, but the market is soft for those right now so there are no definite plans. As long as *LLWM* readers continue to like Quincannon and Elana Lore continues to buy his adventures, I'll keep writing them.

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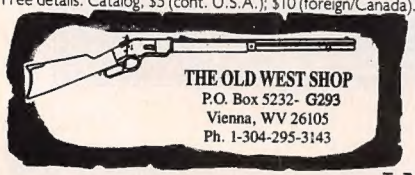

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